"Local Watershed Schedules Landowner Forums"

At their 02/22/16 meeting held in Barnesville, the Board of Managers, Buffalo-Red River Watershed District (BRRWD), discussed a series of landowner forums that will be held throughout the District in March 2016, to discuss flood damage reduction (fdr). Meetings will be held on Tuesday, March 15, at the Gerald Nordick farm, Rothsay, MN; Friday, March 18, at the BRRWD Office in Barnesville; and Tuesday, March 22, at the American Legion, Lake Park, MN. The forums will begin at 9:00 AM and will conclude by 12 noon, followed by a free noon lunch. The agenda at all three meetings will be the same. Distributing the meetings throughout the District will hopefully encourage landowner participation. The agenda will talk about the need for fdr, the BRRWD's goals in this regard, the cost of doing fdr projects, and possible ways to finance these projects. One source of potential funding could come from rejoining the Red River Watershed Management Board (RRWMB). However, if we were a member of the RRWMB in 2016, the local BRRWD tax would approximately double.

The Board also spent time at their meeting discussing easement values for fdr sites. Chuck Anderson, ARC Appraisals, presented some of his findings in that regard. Anderson said that each County determines land values based on the crop equivalency rating (CER). Then based on recent land sales, the numbers are adjusted accordingly. The Board noted that the preferred method for acquiring easements would be a one-time payment to the landowner. Other factors included that this is a one-time, up-front payment, and that if a particular landowner experienced crop damage because of the project, Federal Crop Insurance would not pay for that loss. There was also some discussion that certain lands within a particular project site may also have tiling, where the landowner has a considerable investment. Office staff will draft up a fact sheet for the Board's consideration regarding easement values. The last time the BRRWD came up with a formula for fdr easements, was back in the early 1980s, when the values were set at $800/acre for cropland, $500/acre for hay/pasture lands, and $150/acre for non-ag areas. There was some discussion about setting the current easement payment rate at 125% of the taxable market value for a particular parcel.

Other business included:

- A review of the BRRWD's financial statements. Current cash on hand is $700,164.88.

- Approval of permits to: Roger Minch for approximately 47 acres of pattern tiling to outlet into Stony Creek in the SE¼, Section 17, Humboldt Township, Clay County; the City of Barnesville for the infrastructure needed in the Del Acres Gilbertson Expansion Second Addition; Gerald Nordick to re-align approximately 220' of existing waterway crossing his property in the SW¼, Section 23, Meadows Township, Wilkin County; and Peter Fjestad to install two tile lines to address low areas in the SE¼, Section 2, Carlisle Township, Otter Tail County.

- Noting that a list of alternatives has been mailed to landowners in the SW¼, Section 33, Barnesville Township, Clay County, regarding an approach that was removed last fall along 180th AVE S.

- Noting that a landowner meeting was held on 02/19/16 regarding possible drainage alternatives for lands located in Sections 5 and 6, Wolverton Township, Wilkin County. A study was conducted by Houston Engineering, Inc. (HEI) that looked at alternatives for this area west of Trunk Highway No. 75. Bruce Albright, BRRWD Administrator, said that those landowners at the meeting understood that it will be up to them to determine which alternative they may want to develop. They could either install the ditch on the
south side of County Road No. 50 via the BRRWD's permitting system, or they could petition to make it a legal drainage system in accordance with Minnesota Drainage Law.

- Reviewed a final cost analysis completed by staff regarding the Manston Slough Restoration Project. This project was completed in the fall of 2014. Total project costs were $6,348,642. Outside funding sources including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), who furnished $4,134,237, or about 65% of the project costs. The local share which is split two-thirds to the BRRWD and their general taxation and one-third to the benefitted landowners as determined by the Appraisers Report, totals $2,214,405. The bond sale for the project was held in 2013 in the amount of $1,339,054. Locally, the BRRWD still needs to come up with approximately $806,000 and the local landowners share would be $294,000. Local funding will be addressed at the BRRWD's 2017 Budget Hearing to be held in late August/early September. The BRRWD also reviewed the Preliminary Wetland Restoration Plan of Operation (WRPO) as prepared by the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) for the Stuehrenberg and Van Wechel properties located within the Manston Slough Project. No problems were noted.

- Discussed the status of Project 49, Oakport Flood Mitigation. The project contractor, RJ Zavoral and Sons, Inc., East Grand Forks, MN, plans to start clearing and grubbing in the next several weeks (weather permitting). There are still several landowners on Phase 4 that need to be contacted to renew their temporary construction easements. Those easements were initially acquired, but expired in 2013 due to the lack of State funding to complete this phase.

- Received an update from HEI regarding six potential ringdike projects. The 2015 Legislature, allocated $400,000 to the Red River Basin of the North for ringdikes. Two of the sites should qualify for NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program funding.

- Received the 2015 dam inspection reports for nine fdr projects owned and operated by the BRRWD. Copies of the reports have been furnished to the DNR. The Board approved any repairs needed to restore the integrity of the dams.

- Received updates on several comprehensive projects currently being studied by the BRRWD through the Mediation Project Team (PT) process. The next PT meeting is scheduled for Thursday, April 7, 2016 at 1:30 PM in the BRRWD office. Active studies include Barnesville Township Comprehensive Drainage, Stony Creek, and the South Branch of the Buffalo River in Wilkin County.

- Noting that work continues on the update of the BRRWD's Revised Watershed Management Plan. Hopes are that HEI and BRRWD staff will have a draft copy for the Board's review at the 03/14/16 meeting.

- To comply with the 2015 Buffer Law, HEI staff is currently working with the DNR to furnish them with all of the mapping regarding our legal drains. The BRRWD is the "Drainage Authority" for 84 systems in Wilkin, Becker, and Clay Counties.

- Planned attendance for a Diversion Authority (DA) meeting to be held on Thursday, February 25, 2016, at 12 noon at the Fargo City Commission room, to review a new Joint Powers Agreement. Albright noted that the DA has asked for a tabulation of the BRRWD's fdr project costs since 2009. That information was furnished. For Oakport, the costs total $34.3 million and for Georgetown $4.3 million.

- Noting that a landowner informational meeting has been scheduled for Thursday, February 25, 2016, at 7:00 PM in the Courtroom, Wilkin County Courthouse,
Breckenridge, MN with landowners along the Otter Tail River from Orwell Dam to the City of Breckenridge. The BRRWD has an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) grant to study this stretch. The EPA grant will be supplemented with a grant obtained through the Wilkin Soil and Water Conservation District from BWSR. Parts of the Otter Tail River were straightened back in the early 1950s with an Army Corps of Engineers project. That project is now degrading and based on a 2006 Total Maximum Daily Load study completed by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, approximately 40,000 tons of soil is being moved annually from the Otter Tail River through Breckenridge.

- Noting that the BRRWD will host a bus tour of the North Ottawa Project as developed by the Bois de Sioux Watershed District on April 8, 2016. The bus will leave the Barnesville office at 9:00 AM. We should be able to take approximately 40 people. Sign-ups will be based on a first come, first served basis. Interested landowners should contact the BRRWD office.

- The Board spent some time going over their draft updated Rules. The BRRWD's current rules were established in 1979. A new section includes information and permitting requirements regarding subsurface drainage (tile) activities. For each planning region, existing gauge stations operated by the United States Geological Survey can be used to determine whether or not tiling in a particular area may need to be stopped during flood periods.

- Discussed potential funding sources for the Wolverton Creek Restoration Project. BWSR has their Targeted Watershed Program, with applications due March 9, 2016. They have $8,750,000 available. Once the initial applications are scored by BWSR staff, if selected, the next step would be the interview phase, which would be taking place March 29-April 5. Albright and Erik S. Jones, Engineer, HEI, met with Brian Dwight and Pete Waller, BWSR, on 02/22/16 to discuss the program. The Wolverton Creek Project has been submitted two times in the past for this funding, but not selected. Dwight said it is important to be able to tell the "pollution story". Another potential funding source is the Environment of Natural Resources Trust Fund which is handled through the Legislative-Citizens Commission on Minnesota Resources. They are currently taking applications for their 2017 funding priorities, which would begin on July 1, 2017. Applications will be accepted until Monday, March 21. If submitted by March 11, 2016, LCCMR staff will be available to assist and review draft proposals. The Board approved a motion to authorize BRRWD staff/HEI to submit both applications.

- Discussed the 18th Annual Joint Conference of the RRWMB and the Red River Basin Flood Damage Reduction Work Group scheduled for March 23-24, 2016, Courtyard by Marriott, Moorhead, MN.

- Noting that Managers Van Amburg, Fjestad, and Hanson, along with BRRWD Administrator, Bruce E. Albright, plan on attending the upcoming 2016 Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts Legislative Reception and Day at the Capitol on March 30-31.

- Approved the payment of bills totaling $12,713.97.

The next meeting of the Board of Managers, BRRWD, is scheduled for Monday, March 14, 2016, at 7:00 PM in the Barnesville Office located at 1303 4th AVE NE, Barnesville, MN. All meetings are open to the public. For more information, please visit our website at www.brrwd.org.