

Eighth Street Dam maintenance leads to letters seeking board recall

By CINDY YINGST
The Columbia Press

A Warrenton resident who contends the Skipanon Water Control District can't legally abandon its flood-control duties has sent a letter to property owners within the district asking whether they're interested in recalling board members.

Scott Widdicombe said he reacted to what he sees as misconduct by board members at the expense of Warrenton's residents.

It all boils down to the Eighth Street Dam and its 60-year history, which has gotten particularly messy since the water control district chose to keep the tide gates open in 2012 and remove them permanently in 2015.

"Ultimately, there's going to be a resolution on the Eighth Street Dam and it doesn't have to take years to happen," Widdicombe said.

THE LETTERS

Earlier this month, he sent letters to 297 property owners within the district. Each property owner pays an operation and maintenance fee of \$30 per parcel, which provides the district with about \$11,500 a year in revenue.

The money is no longer being spent on flood control and is, instead, going to promote fish passage, Widdicombe contends.

Widdicombe told the City Commission Tuesday night that he has heard back from many residents in the district and will be organizing a meeting with them to discuss

options.

"I have heard verbal comments from directors of the Skipanon Water Control District who claim that they have the right to do anything they decide for this river regardless of what their charter or Oregon State Law (says)," Widdicombe told commissioners. "It appears to me that the district board is making decisions that do not follow their own charter."

He gave city commissioners copies of ORS 553, the state's law on creation of water control districts, which states "water control districts may be created ... for the purpose of acquiring, purchasing, constructing, improving, operating and maintaining drainage, irrigation and flood and surface water control works in order to prevent damage and destruction of life and property by floods."

It also states that water control districts can have a secondary purpose of improving fish life and water quality, but that can't be their primary purpose.

Property owners within the Skipanon Water Control District's boundaries, when they petitioned the court to form in 1960, said they sought to "undertake the construction or purchase of drainage, flood or surface water control" to benefit their properties, according to court records.

Today, city leaders seek a grant to fund a study of flood potential since the gates have been removed. Mayor Henry Balensifer brought

up the study during a mediation meeting last year with members of the water control district, who emphatically rejected participating in it.

"To the best of my knowledge, Mr. Widdicombe is not a constituent or resident of our district," said Tessa Scheller, who has served on the board continuously since 1993, having been elected six times.

Board members maintain seven miles of river and three structures on a daily basis, she said, removing large and small woody debris blocking dams and culverts, monitoring water levels, taking photos.

The Eighth Street Dam has been examined numerous times by engineers and federal employees who have determined it to be ineffective for flood control and an impediment to downstream flows, Scheller said.

But some of those studies have been called into question because they were done to determine fish flows instead of flooding, an argument Scheller rejects. "The dam was dangerous and obsolete. It degraded water quality and destroyed a historic salmon run."

She called Widdicombe's claims "alarmist and inaccurate" and said she and other board members planned to attend Wednesday night's County Commission meeting to assure them they have no intention of removing other flood structures.

"His biggest lie ... is that we're going to drain Cullaby Lake," a Clatsop County asset, Scheller said. "We've spent thousands of dollars repairing the dam at Cullaby Lake. There are 140 homes there."



Widdicombe



Scheller

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