Algae removal proposal criticized for Lake Menomin

By Pamela Powers
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MENOMONIE — Mayor Randy Knaack on Monday asked the City Council to allow him to raise funds and possibly have the city provide matching dollars to buy a commercial skimming machine to remove the blue-green algae bloom that has choked Lake Menomin for the past several years.

Knaack said he believes he has residents' support and that a cleanup of the lake is needed to help tourism. He said the algae could be pasteurized to kill toxins.

Several council members criticized Knaack's approach, saying they supported cleaning up the lake but that it needs more study and is not just a local issue.

"We have to know what the hell we're doing when we go out and do this," said Councilwoman Sandy White. "That blue-green algae needs to be carefully looked at, and what happens once we skim? Spores released could potentially cause a greater bloom."

White said she's also concerned that a skimming machine could cost more than $300,000.

Councilwoman Mary Solberg expressed concern about legal and liability questions that must be answered before any action is taken to raise money.

No vote was taken on Knaack's suggestions. The council and mayor agreed to continue looking at the algae problem and create a plan to address it.

Scott McGovern, a UW-Stout biology professor, spoke to the council Monday and warned of possible consequences to mechanically removing the algae.

"There is some concern the physical removal breaks cells and increases toxins in the area," said McGovern, adding that the state Department of Natural Resources needs to further study the issue.

The algae's toxic properties mean it should be treated with caution, he said. There are concerns about putting it in landfills, and employees who work around algae blooms should have their liver enzymes checked before and after exposure, he said.
Blue-green algae should not be placed on vegetable gardens because of concerns about consumption of toxins and heavy metals.

During public comments, Pat Thibado of Menomonie, who has built a prototype algae-skimming machine, said he doesn't want money for the project, but is trying to help the city.

"This is a scourge of the city of Menomonie," he said. "We need to do something about it. This is an attempt to do something."

A request by Craig and Nikki Turner, 1518 Stout Road, to have their property rezoned from limited multiple residential to local commercial was referred back to the Plan Commission.

The commission previously turned down the request. The Turners asked the City Council to consider creating a new zoning category for light commercial or office space. Four other nearby property owners along Stout Road have expressed interest in having the entire area rezoned.

Some neighbors want the property to stay residential to protect the east side neighborhood. They also expressed concern that rezoning the Turner's property would lower their property values.

The council accepted the resignation of Ward 7 Councilman Ryan Halloran. The council decided to wait until the April 3 election to see if a write-in candidate is elected. Halloran, a UW-Stout student, resigned because he has moved out of the ward. Ward 7 covers much of the university's campus.

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