Commissioners hear of West Lakes’ progress

By Matt Getts
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ALBION — After a spring of epic flooding, the West Lakes Association has taken the bull by the horns. During Monday’s meeting of the Noble County Board of Commissioners, association President Diann Scott provided an update on measures being taken to mitigate, prevent and deal with future high-water issues in the chain that consists of Jones, Waldron, Steinbarger and Tamarack lakes.

Scott had last appeared before the commissioners on July 10. “It’s been a whirlwind of activity the last 90 days,” Scott told the commissioners. The West Lakes Association has held three call-to-action meetings: July 12, July 18 and July 26. Those meetings each attracted more than 147 attendees, Scott said. A meeting also was held on Aug. 8 with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Through its various meetings, the association has developed its top 10 action plans. Each action plan has its own project leader, detailed tasks to accomplish and agencies that need to be involved in the process. Action plans include the formation of a Noble County lakes council, the installation of a lake gauge on Waldron Lake, as well as projects to deal with sediment and vegetation issues that affect lake levels.

Aid and recovery efforts have included 87 mold remediations and the removal of more than 250 log jams and downed trees over five weekends along the Elkhart River.

Scott said the removal of the log jams has resulted in visual improvements to water levels and water flow. “We are making a difference,” Scott said.

Also at Monday’s meeting, the commissioners received an updated report on Noble County’s bridge inventory from United Consulting, an Indianapolis-based firm contracted to do the work. Noble County has 64 total bridges, according to United’s Scott Minnich, with the average bridge being 55 years old. The average Indiana county has 143 bridges, with the average bridge age 43 years.

Noble County has eight bridges with a federal sufficiency rating of less than 50 on a 1-to-100 scale. Those bridges would qualify for federal assistance for replacement.

Minnich said the top five bridges on the replacement list are:
• Bridge 136 on C.R. 400E, over the CSX rail lines;
• Bridge 134 on C.R. 225E over the CSX rail lines;
• Bridge 147 on Pigeon Street over the Elkhart River in Ligonier;
• Bridge 16 on C.R. 500S over Black Creek; and
• Bridge 24 on C.R. 950E over Croft Ditch.

Noble County Highway Engineer Zack Smith reported that work is being done, or some administrative progress has been made, on all five of those bridges.

In other business Monday:
• The commissioners voted to spend $24,463 to repair cracking that is occurring on Bridge 139, which is on Long Lake Road.
• Noble County Assessor Kim Carson received approval to pay $32,500 for a company to provide updated trending data for 2018 property value assessments payable in 2019. The company uses sales within the past year in geographic areas to determine new assessments for neighborhoods.
The goal, according to Carson, is to come up with a fair, actual market value on all properties.
• Consultant Derek Faulk reported on an option to deal with the leachate being collected at the old Noble County landfill. The county is currently paying the town of Albion to process the leachate, which amounts to approximately 1,000 gallons every third day.
The county has to pay to collect and transport the leachate.
Faulk said one option would be to go through an Indiana Department of Environmental Management permitting process to allow for the leachate to be sprayed out on county-owned land.
“We could set up an automatic system,” Commissioner Dave Abbott said.
The first step in the process, according to Faulk, would be to pay for testing on the leachate to see if it meets IDEM safety standards. If the levels are good, the county could apply for a permit.
Another option the county could consider is to create a man-made wetland where the leachate would be naturally filtered. Faulk said the upfront costs for such a project are high.
Commissioner Dave Dolezal said the county is merely looking at its options for dealing with the liquid that is leaching out of the landfill.
“It’s all exploratory,” Dolezal said.
The landfill issue has been a thorn in the side of the county for decades now.
“We’ve been trying to get closure for how many years?” Abbott asked.
• Formally declared the week of Oct. 22-28 as 4-H Week in Noble County.
Noble County Purdue Extension educator Doug Keenan reported Noble County 4-H has enrolled 600 youngsters in first grade through high school senior. He also told the commissioners that those children are assisted by approximately 200 volunteers.
“That’s impressive,” Abbott said.

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