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Special tax OK'd for dam repairs

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Project now awaits state approval as design work begins

By Tom Hoffman

WANTAGE — Although residents of Lake Neepaulin still have a long way to go before rehabilitating the dam in their community, collectively they took a big step last week in their decades-long struggle to preserve the lake barrier.

On Oct. 30, the Wantage Township Committee unanimously approved plans to authorize a special tax assessment for 720 residents of the lake community. That tax, which would be applied only to residents of the lake community, is to be tied to the actual cost of the loan to repair the crumbling dam, "plus all municipal costs incurred in this process," said Wantage Township Administrator Jim Doherty.

The state's Department of Environmental Protection has not yet authorized funding for the Friends of Lake Neepaulin (FOLN), the not-for-profit group that's responsible for repairing the dam, said Doherty. "So it is premature to try and calculate what the actual special tax assessment will be," said Doherty.

Still, the township has put together a theoretical scenario for Lake Neepaulin residents in which 720 taxpayers would repay a \$1 million loan for 20 years at 2 percent interest, with vacant lots being assessed at 50 percent of what so-called "Improved lots" would pay, said Doherty. Under that plan, the additional costs would work out to \$92 per year per taxpayer over the 20-year period, he added.

Safety net

William Gettler, a Wantage resident, questioned whether any township taxpayers outside of Lake Neepaulin could potentially be burdened with loan repayment costs if lake residents don't all pay up. Eileen Born, an attorney with Dolan and Dolan, P.A. in Newton who represents FOLN, said there would be no out-of-pocket costs to either the township or other taxpayers since FOLN would be required to maintain an escrow account as part of the dam project. "If the escrow account dips below a certain amount, it has to be replenished" by lake residents, Born said.

Reconstruction ordered

The state DEP has mandated that the dam be reconstructed in order to meet modern safety standards, according to a flyer issued by Friends of Lake Neepaulin (FOLN). Concerns about the dam's structural integrity were first raised in 1979 after it was inspected by the Army Corps of Engineers, said Tom Jable, an FOLN member. The dam is 290 feet long and 26 feet high, said Jable.

FOLN is opposed to having the lake drained to avoid a dam restoration effort due to fears that drainage may cause additional problems. Those concerns range from residential wells running dry to a potential drop-off in property values, said resident Betsy Jable, who has been working with her husband Tom to address the dam situation since 1980.

Earlier this month, FOLN applied for a low-interest state loan to repair the dam, according to resident and FOLN member Joy Steinbacher. She said FOLN probably won't hear about the status of the loan request for at least three months. In the meantime, design work for dam repairs is being prepared for FOLN by Civil Dynamics, Inc., a provider of dam engineering services in Stockholm.

"We still have a long road ahead of us," said Steinbacher.