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Lake residents vocal on special tax

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Tax for dam repair draws ire from those who don't belong to the lake club, By Tom Hoffman

WANTAGE - Disgruntled Lake Neepaulin residents who are opposed to a special tax assessment to pay for long-needed dam repairs jammed the Wantage Township Municipal Building on Dec. 11 to voice their opinions.

"If all 11,000 Wantage Township residents were being assessed an extra \$4 or \$5 each, I wouldn't have a problem with it," said Karen Merritt, a Lake Neepaulin resident who has helped gather 288 signatures for a petition against the special tax assessment. "But I do have a problem with being singled out (as a Lake Neepaulin resident)," she said in a telephone interview after the Dec. 11 meeting. "The dam is privately owned."

Joy Steinbacher, president of the lake group Friends of Lake Neepaulin — FOLN — contends that the New Jersey Safe Dam Act, which covers dam repairs, was written in such a way that "anyone who benefits from the lake is responsible for paying dam repairs."

But according to a Web site posted by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection that outlines the components of the Safe Dam Act, when a lake or dam is owned by a private association, "liens may be imposed upon the individual owners of the property represented by the association."

Although only FOLN members have access to the lake's clubhouse and beach, members say that non-members living in the lake area should recognize "the importance of having a viable lake," said FOLN member Tom Jable in an interview with The Advertiser-News a few weeks ago.

For instance, if FOLN were forced to drain the lake instead of making the needed repairs, property values could drop, individual wells might be compromised and firefighters would be without a water source, according to a newsletter distributed by FOLN.

For her part, Merritt disagrees with the assumptions that private wells would run dry and property values would deteriorate. "I haven't been privy to a hydrology report," she said.

Other Lake Neepaulin property owners such as Kathy Gorman claim that the township "didn't do enough to notify the residents" about its plans to hold a public meeting to discuss a special tax assessment. Merritt says she learned about the tax assessment in The Advertiser-News and then contacted other residents in her neighborhood. Many said they hadn't heard about the ruling.

Letting residents know

Wantage Township used a "multi-pronged" approach in contacting Lake Neepaulin residents about the Oct. 30 committee meeting, said Township Administrator Jim Doherty. This included newspaper ads, a notification posted on the township's Web site and a notice posted on the front of the municipal building, he said.

For its part, FOLN held "numerous" meetings over the past several months regarding the status of the dam and sent mailings and flyers to all Lake Neepaulin residents, said Steinbacher.

In November, Merritt went to the Wantage Township Municipal Building to request a list of all Lake Neepaulin property owners, which she obtained. She mailed postcards to property owners to notify them of the committee's ruling, including several who live out-of-state, she said.

What's next

Gorman said she's planning to contact an attorney this week to explore the rights of non-FOLN members who live at Lake Neepaulin.

Doherty said he plans to arrange a meeting to meet with New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection officials to discuss "discrepancies" that have arisen in correspondence between the township and the state. In December 2007 and February 2008, the DEP sent letters to Wantage Township notifying officials that they needed to meet state-imposed deadlines to repair the dam or risk being subjected to fines and having the lake drained. Doherty said some Lake Neepaulin residents have since obtained different information from the DEP.

Said Doherty, "When residents bring concerns to our attention, we have a responsibility to address them."