Meeting opened at 3:00 pm by Armas Soorus.

Present: Christina Karnisz-AES, Sharon Goble-Manistee Co. PC, Armas Soorus-LMWCC, Mary Reed-Portage Lk. WS, Kurt Schindler-Norman Twp., David Spruance-LMWCC, Chris Riley-NFS, Ed Hoogterp-NNW, Jim Squier-LMWCC, Jackie McKellar-Cool Lk. POA, Joyce Durdel-LMWCC

Minutes approval for 9-13-17 and 1-23-18 meetings. Motion to approve by Jim Squier, second by David Spruance. Passed. The agenda was reviewed, WSP progress and status update is the focus today.

Jackie McKellar asked for help on Stronach Creek road crossing funding. The CRA recently put this site project on hold as it is moderately severe but not severe enough for them to address right now. Ms. McKellar would still like to seek funds from the LMWCC, or at least get assistance in grant writing, etc. Armas offered help on grant writing. Chris Riley suggests looking at the Stronach Creek sub watershed and asked to have a map to work with so we can see where these points of interest are located. Ed will provide that for the next meeting on April 19. More discussion on road crossings led Ed to comment that road crossing data need updating about every 10 years and it is time for an update. That is one of the major expenses addressed in a watershed plan. The Stronach Creek road crossings have engineering specifications completed and DEQ permits applied for but the cost of repair cannot be covered without grants. Kurt Schindler pointed out that if the watershed plan is approved it will open funding opportunities. Ed commended Jackie for the work that has been done and recommends it be part of the watershed plan.

Armas brought up the watershed survey noting that requests for survey participation have been sent to area newspapers. Ed said there are about 100 responses to date. Armas wanted to know if the computer link to the survey could be changed to a simpler format as it is quite long and not easy to use. Ed will check it out with Scott.

We are making plans for two public watershed plan educational meetings, one in mid-May and another in June, with the help of the OLM and Manistee area Conservation Districts. The first will be held in the Luther area and the second on the west side of the watershed, sites and times yet to be determined.

Ed suggests that a draft of implementation tasks for the plan can now be posted on our website. He provided documents on Syers Lake, Luther Dam and a draft of the Information-Education section of the plan. These are some of the critical areas in the watershed.

Syers Lake dam has failed and is to be removed and replaced by a bottomless culvert with road access to properties beyond, the creek will be allowed flow without blockage. The lake itself will drop 18 inches but that is expected and residents understand this fact.

More controversial, is the Luther Dam. The river and pond powered a sawmill, electric production, and eventually became the village pond. The dam failed in 1986 along with 12 other dams in the state after a major rain event. Most of them were not rebuilt. Some groups opposed rebuilding the dam but the village, through the action of the state legislature, they did rebuild the dam and retain the pond. Upon refilling the pond in 1993, it began to leak and failed again. Another replacement dam with a bottom draw was installed and stands today as part of a park area. The primary use for the pond includes Luther’s pride of history, the mill pond is part of the village and makes it what it is.

The pond has no boat launch, the swimming area is full of cattails, it is shallow, weedy and warm. There is little real usage of the pond. Ed stated, “If you try to look at it through a designer’s eye, you could turn that into a park with stream and a few nice trees on it and have a much nicer park than you have now. But the village owns it and it is their decision.”

The plan includes an option for a careful dewatering of the pond, the removal of the structure and restoring of the streambed that could produce significant benefits, especially if combined with grant funding for park development. The focus of the WMP is on water quality and stream ecology, but park and stream restoration could also relieve the village of liability and expense of maintaining the dam, increase local use of the parkland, and include elements to memorialize the genuine historical significance of the site. Including this option in the plan opens the door to grant funding in the future.

The WMP recognizes the primacy of the village of Luther in determining the future of the dam and pond. For this reason, a second alternative is included in the plan’s implementation (ch. 5). In this alternative, the dam will continue in place with the bottom draw mechanism managed jointly by the village and DNR to make sure that thermal impact is minimized, and the study would access the feasibility of fish passage strategies, and all safety measures would be continued and monitored. The negative impacts of the dam are blockage of fish passage, a likely thermal impact from the still water of pond, and of lower probability but high impact threat, is another failure of the dam. Alternative two is to leave the dam there and do the best to manage it that you can.

David S. asked how much the village pays to maintain the dam. Ed is looking into that now. Armas talked to the village president who expressed some frustration over being charged by the state to inspect it but having no authority to do anything with it. Ed said that monitoring the effect that the dam has on the river is a needed step to further develop plans. For instance, are the stream tributaries above the dam potential fish breeding grounds? Is there an effect on the temperature of the water from the dam? Chris suggests installing thermographs to monitoring water temperature above and below the dam. The final recommendations for the watershed plan will be based on information gained through survey tools and steering committee and watershed education meetings.

The Information and Education page will become Ch. 7 of the plan, including general watershed education and three specific issues, one is impact of land use practices, limiting introduction and spread of invasive species, and third, the management of onsite waste water systems-septic tanks. These seem to be some of the main issues affecting the river now. A suggestion was made to form and “eyes and ears” program where community can report to the LMWCC about river issues. Ed suggests maybe the website would be the tool for that type of interaction. Maybe this can be written into the plan.

Chris suggests it may be of use to engage property owners to photograph shorelines to help track changes over time along the shoreline. Ed noted that is happening in some watersheds where volunteers with GPS cameras are being used to help document current conditions with GPS locations throughout the shoreline community and track conditions going forward. A lot can be learned about the best way to manage shorelines using photos. Now drones are being used for the same purpose.

Lack of protective zoning and planning was discussed. Stronach, Norman, Peacock and Filer have zoning in place. As of now, the other 13 townships are not known to have water-protective zoning in place. Scott and Joyce are working on a spread sheet to outline what townships have any form of protective zoning. Considerable discussion ensued about the pros and cons of zoning. Ultimately the local government has the power to put protection in place or not. It was agreed that shoreline properties that have protective measures such as in the Wild and Scenic Rivers program, generally retain higher property values.

Joyce asked if ordinances could be used by townships to apply protections for bodies of water. It was stated by some that a master plan needed to be in place and zoning is part of the plan. On zoning, Kurt stated that “more importantly, when you use civil infractions enforcement, you are in front of a judge and the goal and purpose isn’t to punish or fine the person, the goal and the purpose is to fix a problem. So the judge orders them to change the problem or to stop. That’s where the strength with zoning with civil infractions comes in. The really big strength of zoning is it prevents the problem from occurring in the first place. The state legislature delegated all that to local government. So when the state legislature adopts something known as the DEQ, that’s punitive, that’s after the fact. So, will the DEQ come and get mad at me because I am a factory and I discharge too much waste into a river or lake? Yes, but the pollution already occurred, the damage is already done. Now the DEQ sends in people to fix the problem. Zoning is designed to create a site plan situating that factory so that the discharge pipe isn’t going into the river in the first place. “

Jim stated that where he lives is a subdivision along the river that has its’ own rules and regulations that are in place to protect river along with ways to enforce them. The township has no zoning but the subdivision developer included rules that are protective of the river, and is a good thing. But the areas around us don’t have it.

Armas added, back to talking about the education, it’s a process. It’s an incremental commitment. If you can get the people to understand where the problems are, and then you try to get them to help figure out how to solve it.

Sharon made a comment about looking at counties’ recreation plans, an example was given that Manistee County’s includes communities’ recreational values, and that is what you are trying include as part of the plan.

Ed said that many of the things we discussed today will not be written as part of the plan but will be recognized as ‘next steps’ to further protect the river.

Armas adjourned the meeting at 4:36 pm.

Minutes submitted by Joyce Durdel.