

# Pine Knot News

Vol. 4 No. 16

www.PineKnotNews.com

Friday, April 16, 2021

\$1.25

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This week in Carlton County's only independent, locally owned newspaper.



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# On tap: Safer water

## Twin Lakes area waterline plan is lifeline for many

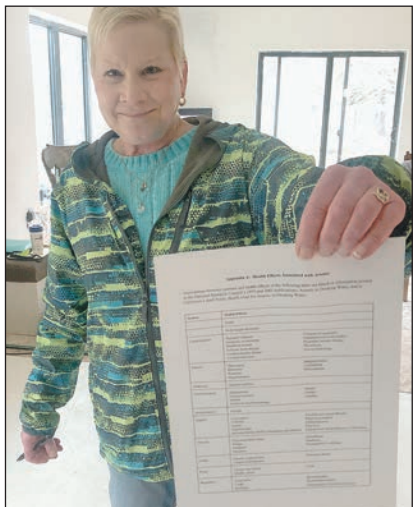
Jana Peterson  
news@pineknotnews.com

Homeowners in the Olsonville area of Twin Lakes Township struggle with well water that smells bad, will dye their whites orange and may contain arsenic (along with other chemicals). On top of all that, the supply of that substandard water isn't even a sure thing.

For 20 years, township officials have known the answer to the water issue — getting water from nearby Carlton — but they haven't been able to afford the high price tag of transporting that clean, potable and plentiful water.

But the end is in sight. Last year the state legislature and Gov. Tim Walz included \$7.5 million for a waterline from Carlton to Schmitz Road in the bonding bill passed last October. Construction on the two-year project is set to start this summer.

"This will solve so many water quality issues, from the rotten egg smell, to the iron and the hardness of the water, plus the fact that there just isn't enough," said Carlton public works supervisor Derek Wolf. Switching momentarily to his fire chief "hat," Wolf pointed out that the entire corridor covered by the waterline will also have fire hydrants for the first time, which is a huge



Becky Walters, above, has a sheet outlining the health effects of arsenic. Testing of her well in 2017 showed the contaminate in her water. Her neighbor, Debbie Davis, top, said looks are deceiving as she draws from her kitchen tap. She tries to not ingest her water.

factor for public safety.

The waterline will run west from Carlton down Highway 210 as far as Schmitz Road (past the county transfer station), with extensions south on Highway 61 serving the County Transportation building and Olsonville homes, and to Schmitz Road residents. All the businesses on Highway 210 will be able to access the waterline if they want to.

It's been a long time coming, said township chair Diane Felde-Finke. She's been on the town board for close to 30 years, and said phone calls and efforts to resolve the water problems have been ongoing. Prior



Twin Lakes Township supervisor Randy Willie says he made a lot of trips to the legislature over the past couple years to plead for better water for residents and businesses. *Photos by Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

to going to the state legislature, they also applied for grants (unsuccessfully) from the Army Corps of Engineers, the USDA and other state agencies and grant funds.

"We'd hire someone to crunch the numbers, but it never worked unless we could get enough grant money," she said. "It's just awesome that things finally came together."

### Water quality

It's been no secret that there are water quality and water quantity issues in that area of Twin Lakes Township. But news that both wells on Schmitz Road — adjacent to a former landfill and the current

transfer station — and the Olsonville neighborhood had issues with arsenic contamination came up only over the past 10 years. In 2016, engineer Tim Korby told county commissioners that some wells in the Schmitz Road area had arsenic levels nearly 45 times the legal limit.

It was March 2017 when Becky Walters, who lives in the Olsonville neighborhood off Highway 61, decided to get her well water tested and found out she also had arsenic in her water supply. She wonders if that is the reason she got ulcerative colitis in 1996, an inflammatory bowel disease that causes inflammation and ulcers in the digestive tract.

"They say arsenic is cumulative, and I've been exposed to that water for 26 years," Walters said.

She holds up an information sheet outlining the health effects of consuming arsenic over time. The list outlines the different body systems (cardiovascular, dermal, endocrine, nervous, etc.) with a range of symptoms and syndromes for each category. Among the effects are anemia, heart palpitations, vascular disease, skin cancer, abdominal pain, fibrosis, many different cancers and more. The most serious effect listed is "death."

According to the Minnesota Department of Health, "consuming water with even low levels of arsenic over a long time is associated with diabetes and increased risk of cancers of the bladder, lungs, liver, and other organs."

*Continued on back page*

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# Water ...

Continued from Page 1

Ingesting arsenic can also contribute to cardiovascular and respiratory disease; reduced intelligence in children; and skin problems such as lesions, discoloration, and the development of corns." MDH advocates that people test their wells for arsenic at least once.

Walters said she paid a little over \$100 to have her well tested by an accredited lab in Duluth, and it was money well spent, she said, even though her health had already been negatively impacted. She can alleviate flare-ups of her colitis with prednisone — which comes with its own side effects — and other help from her doctor, but at least she isn't drinking the water anymore.

Instead, Walters and her neighbors Rod and Debbie Davis buy bottled water to drink and cook with, and they treat the water they bathe in with softeners and filters.

Because they treat their water, it looks fine coming out of the tap.

"You can't filter out arsenic, though," Walters said. She chuckled, thinking back to the time she brought a gallon-jug of water to a meeting about the waterline, and encouraged the elected officials and others there to have a glass. "I told them, 'there's just a little bit of arsenic' in there. They declined."

Rod and Debbie have huge jugs of Culligan water stacked outside their screen house; Walters buys several gallons a week from Walmart.

Arsenic is known to occur naturally in some rocks and soils in Carlton County, said Heather Cunningham, Carlton County zoning and environmental services director. It cannot be seen, tasted or smelled in the water. The only way



The Kwik Trip store on Minnesota Highway 210 has two wells which provide water the store must filter for sediment. Additionally, because of the low supply of water, Kwik Trip installed three 1,000-gallon tanks to store enough water to make sure the store has enough water to flush all the toilets and supply other water needs at any given time. A layer of reddish dust — dried sediment — coats the floor and pipes around the tanks. The poor quality of the water is also hard on the machines in the store. *Jana Peterson / Pine Knot News*

to find out if water is contaminated by arsenic is to have it tested.

According to MPCA officials, it's also possible that arsenic from the former landfill there — which is now under MPCA control — could be present due to changes in subsurface geochemistry associated with decomposition of waste within the landfill, which can release naturally occurring arsenic from the soil into the groundwater. Or it could just be naturally occurring. Whatever the reason, there's no fixing the water itself — that genie is out of the bottle. But the waterline bringing clean water from Carlton will fix the issue for homeowners and businesses.

### Water quantity

While noting that the water quality is poor in that part of the township, Carlton public works supervisor Derek Wolf said arsenic is an issue with a relatively small number of wells.

Water quantity is an issue for almost everyone. One hotel along the corridor had to dig seven wells just to get enough water.

The Kwik Trip store has two wells which provide

water the store must filter for sediment. Additionally, because of the low supply of water, Kwik Trip installed three 1,000-gallon tanks to store enough water to make sure the convenience store has enough water to flush all the toilets and supply other water needs at any given time. A layer of reddish dust — dried sediment — coats the floor and pipes around the tanks. The poor quality of the water is also hard on the machines in the store.

Connecting to the new waterline could open up new opportunities for the Kwik Trip store, assistant store leader Elise Hermann said. Officials there have talked of putting in showers for truckers, and maybe a car wash down the road but there isn't enough water for either option.

Kwik Trip isn't the only business on that corridor affected by the poor water supply, Wolf said, rattling off a list of other places — including various hotels and the Carlton County transportation building — plus the residents who will be positively impacted by the waterline.

Wolf and Twin Lakes



Township supervisor Randy Willie made a lot of trips to the legislature over the past couple years to plead their case, often bringing a bottle filled with untreated water from the Kwik Trip tanks to put on display.

"It helps when they can see how bad it is," Willie said.

### A better future

Although the township had been working on the issue since about 1999, when it installed sewer lines in that part of Twin Lakes Township, things really ramped up after the township and the city of Carlton formed a joint powers board in 2013. Carlton erected a water tower in 2008 with enough capacity to serve both communities, and eventually funding was procured for the city of Carlton to build a bigger and better treatment plant near South

Terrace school. The plant was completed and fully operational in 2020.

"It's going to be awesome to see it all come together," Wolf said.

In addition to offering existing businesses and current residents better water, Willie said he thinks the area could see a "substantial economic impact" as a result of the waterline, in terms of new businesses and higher home prices.

"This corridor hasn't had the opportunity to develop like others in the region (with exits off Interstate 35) because of the water [issues]," he said.

Wolf, Willie and Felde-Finke credited local legislators Rep. Mike Sundin and Sen. Jason Rarick for understanding and advocating for the waterline.

"Their help was huge," Willie said. "We wouldn't have been able to do it without them."

"It was a beautiful bipartisan effort to get this into the package," Felde-Finke said, also crediting county commissioner Mark Thell — who made many trips to the legislature with Willie and Wolf — advisor Reid LeBeau and engineer Susan Wojtkiewicz, as well as the Carlton County board of commissioners and the Fond du Lac Reservation Business Committee for their letters of support.

Bids were opened and awarded recently, with the contract for building the water distribution system going to Northland Constructors of Duluth (\$4,767,260), while Municipal Builders had the low bid for the meter and booster stations at \$1,376,506. That plus other costs involved brings the total estimated cost of the two-year project to just under \$8.3 million.

Felde-Finke said the township will bond for the remaining costs, and establish water rates and fees to cover debt payment, operating costs, replacement reserves and the purchased water from Carlton. The township is also pursuing options to help residents with the cost of connecting to the water system.

Rod and Debbie Davis and Becky Walters say they will welcome access to safer and better water and they are grateful that the state grant will make the bills for that service affordable.

"Really happy," said Walters when asked how she felt about the waterline.

"We're so thankful to Carlton and the township board for all their work," Rod said.

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