Minutes for May 18, 2021 Meeting of Whiting Street Reservoir Committee

Attending:

Sue Ellen Panitch, Chair

Marlene Connor

Harry Craven

Kip Foley

Jeff Horan

Kate Kruckmeyer

Dave Moore

Dave Conti, Superintendent of the Holyoke Water Works, attended as a guest

Meeting called to order at 5:00 p.m.

Minutes accepted of previous meeting.

Marlene gave update on WSR tour scheduled for 4 p.m. on May 19.

Mr. Conti reminded the committee that the only public usage currently allowed at Whiting Street and Ashley Reservoirs is passive recreation, which includes walking, hiking, jogging. McLean Reservoir, as an active drinking water source, is closed to the public. When asked how the Green Certification Program affects the reservoir, Mr. Conti noted that the program is no longer in effect. The program was sponsored by the EPA regarding forest protection and endangered species. Mr. Conti discussed the management plans for all harvesting done in reservoir forests. Most of the harvesting is done in remote areas out of public view. This mgmt. plan is administered by the Massachusetts State Forester.

Benefits of the program include setting aside a percentage for the carbon credit program and forest thinning for fire protection. It’s been 15 years since the last harvest at the WSR. Harvesting at WSR is complicated because of difficult access and perhaps some might be done during the upcoming spillway construction.

Discussion was held about the upcoming spillway project, and Mr. Conti reported that by the winter of 2022, requests for bids would be issued with intent for construction to begin in summer of 2022. Parts of the reservoir would be closed during construction due to construction vehicle traffic. There will be some public access. The work is estimated to take about a year.

In response to a question about legal protections that cover the reservoir, Mr. Conti discussed Chapter 97, which covers reservoirs designated as reserve drinking water. The water commission has set provisions in place to keep this reserve designation. DCR, Office of Dam Safety, conducts an inspection of dams in the state every two years. The WSR dam is designated a large source and a high hazard and the current spillway is the primary deficiency. Gatehouse renovations were completed to make it ready to cover catastrophic loss of another source (such as another reservoir), which can be done within 24 hours with state approval.

Further discussion was held regarding Safe Drinking Water Act, another control over the operation of the WSR as a designated emergency drinking water supply. Mr. Conti noted that in the event that the WSR was put online in an emergency situation, the water is not potable. The reservoir is not connected to the treatment facility but is connected to the distribution system. The WSR pumphouse has not had chlorination equipment since 1996.

Members asked if the Water Board has any other long-term future planned uses for the WSR. Mr. Conti discussed the incredible value of the water resource of the City of Holyoke which includes the WSR. In the future, perhaps, neighboring towns and cities which don’t have the abundance of water that Holyoke has – many of whom rely on groundwater sources which are prone to contamination for their supply – might be very interested in purchasing excess water from Holyoke which would be a great income source for the water department and the city and could possibly become reality. He finishes by saying that’s an example of reasons why it’s important to keep it on a ready basis. He explained further that there have been queries about draining the reservoir, and reasons for not draining it is that it would be unsightly, an environmental detriment to the flora and fauna that make up the recharge area, and the loss of an essential natural resource. He feels that the WSR is one of the jewels of Holyoke and should be maintained as is, both as a reservoir and an attractive place for the community to use and appreciate. He noted that it’s impossible to predict the future and that over time, with new commissioners and new boards, things may change, but this is the current thinking.

He discussed that the ideal City water supply system works from both the north and the south. Currently Holyoke is only supplied from the south. To add redundancy, the Water Works would have to add a new treatment facility at the WSR. There are no plans to do this at the current time.

Members asked him to discuss the layers of authority that apply to the reservoir. Chapter 97 was discussed, and its mission is the protection of the land around the Holyoke Water Works properties, which means they can not be developed, but can be used for infrastructure improvements. Getting out of Chapter 97, Mr. Conti noted, would require an act of new state legislation, such as a Home Rule. Questions about DEP were raised as related to reservoir properties, specifically if they constrain other uses. DEP primarily focuses on drinking water supply and would be open to expansion according to Mr. Conti, however, the Board of Water Commissioner stand with the current use.

Further discussion about on-water recreational uses. A question was asked as to whether it is the board that prevents such usage. Mr. Conti explained that the insurance in place in all city reservoirs prohibits such use. In addition, should that ever change, the Water Department would not be in a position to absorb the cost to maintain such activities, which would require modifications such as site parking, and he reminded the board that current reservoir use is already so high it has resulted in having to take measures to protect public safety such as installing barricades outside the reservoir on Route 202 and managing traffic concerns on Route 141. Mr. Conti reiterated that the Board is guided by their duty to provide clean drinking water and water for fire protection. He noted that there are so many alternative areas that are open to the public for these uses, that it doesn’t warrant the risk on a public water supply.

Further discussion was held with Mr. Conti about the WSR and its relationship to the newly designated New England Trail (NET). It was noted by Mr. Conti that the commissioners have signed a five-year agreement and intend to renegotiate an extension of it. Mr. Conti noted that part of the reservoir road was made part of the NET to make walking safer adjacent to Route 141. Discussion about previous visit from the Park Service, who told us there were financial resources available, and whether they could be used to enhance the area around the reservoir that are part of the New England Trail.

A discussion was held about the possibility of the on-water uses and what further difficulties might develop, specifically with watercraft in and out of waterways frequently leading to invasive species.

Mr. Conti noted that after the construction and improvement of the spillway, the Board hopes to continue the relationship with the public as it currently is. He noted, regarding boating use that there is no specific act that prohibits it and used Quabbin as an example. But he notes that Quabbin is 400 times larger than the WSR, which means that negative impact from on-water use is spread out.

The WSR board commended the water department for the NET agreement and raised the prospect of working collaboratively with the water board should any grant funding become available. Mr. Conti said the water board would certainly be open to that. The Chair, on behalf of the board, thanked Mr. Conti for taking the time to educate and enlighten us.

New discussion about issues we should consider in preparation for a subsequent public hearing. Have we gathered enough information? Are there other groups that we should meet with? It was noted that the HG&E representative, Mike Curtin, will be a guest at our meeting on June 1. It was noted that the framework that we should work with as we prepare for the public hearing and our recommendations is presenting what we have learned. These are other issues and these are boundaries and within that will come our recommendation. We need to lay out parameters, however, it’s not our intention to prevent people at a public hearing from presenting their dreams for the uses of the reservoir. What’s a good way to set that up? Needs and desires of the citizens, even though many are not plausible at the site. Furthermore, citizen discussion on items that may not work might actually work at another facility and we’ll benefit from it.

There is no doubt that the WSR does not stand alone as it relates to all these issues – it involves all the natural resources that surrounds it.

Ideas on the public hearing were discussed and whether there should be a draft and outline provided for public input and suggestion.

There was a discussion about any progress made by Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and their efforts on our behalf.

The next meeting was scheduled for June 1, 2020 at 5:00 p.m.

Meeting adjourned at 6:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Dave Moore