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Turbulent waters

Family wants county to keep hands off of lake as stopping point in wastewater process

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WASHBURN

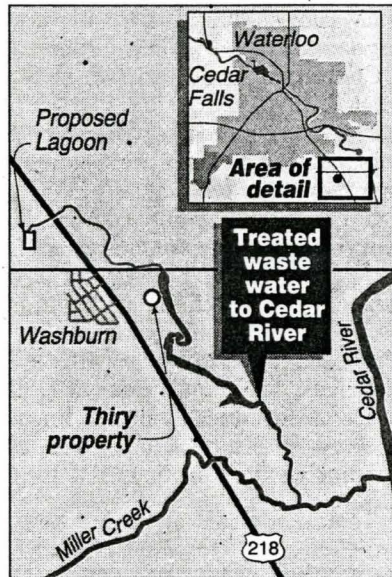
A Washburn family is fighting a decision by county officials to pump treated wastewater from a new sewage lagoon into a small lake near their home.

"We've tried and tried to talk to them, and we're getting nowhere," said Regina Thiry, who has hired an attorney in hopes of convincing the Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors to rethink the idea.

State environmental officials will conduct a public hearing today at 7 p.m. at the Moose Lodge in Washburn to decide on final approval for the sewer project.

If approved, the Thirys' lake will become a brief stopping point for 40 million gallons of treated wastewater that will be carried through creeks and streams each year en route to the Cedar River.

Officials said the lake is necessary to complete a multimillion dollar sewer



COURIER graphic

system for the unincorporated town, which has struggled with water and sewer problems brought on by an aging system.

"If the Department of Natural



Ken and Regina Thiry are trying to stop treated wastewater from being discharged into this lake on the family's property near Washburn. A public hearing on construction of a new sewer lagoon is tonight.

Resources denies the application, that's it for us," said Assistant County Attorney Peter Burke. "If they approve it, the project will continue."

County officials said they've been assured the plan carries no health or environmental hazards and fulfills all state guidelines for engineering safety.

But the Thirys' attorney, Aaron Haw-

baker of Waterloo, said the supervisors aren't looking at the human angle.

"We're being told this is harmless, but it isn't something you want in your backyard," he told the board Tuesday. "It's not benign."

Hawbaker asked board members to consider "real faces and real people," and urged them to look at the Thirys'

lake "as something other than a large ink blot" on the map.

Regina Thiry said the lake is a popular ice fishing spot. Turning it into a receptacle for wastewater — treated or otherwise — "is going to kill it before its time," Hawbaker said.

Any undiscovered weakness in the lagoon's design, he added, could spell

big trouble downstream.

"There can be no doubt that, whether by human error, nature or other factors, the Thiry property will be harmed," he said. "You know as well as I do, if it happens, we'll have to sue the county."

The Thirys want the board to consider a different route for the discharge, or simply pump it into tankers for the trip to the river.

The supervisors promised to consider any idea that might head off a lawsuit. Chairman Brian Quirk, a Hudson Democrat, and Sonia Johannsen, a Republican from La Porte City, will attend tonight's DNR hearing.

Other supervisors said they want to be there, too, but worry it would violate open meetings laws that prohibit a majority of board members from gathering anywhere without giving public notice 24 hours in advance.

Leon Mosley, a Waterloo Republican, said he'll attend the hearing "regardless." He recently voted against spending \$100,000 for the lagoon site until the DNR gives final approval.

DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor