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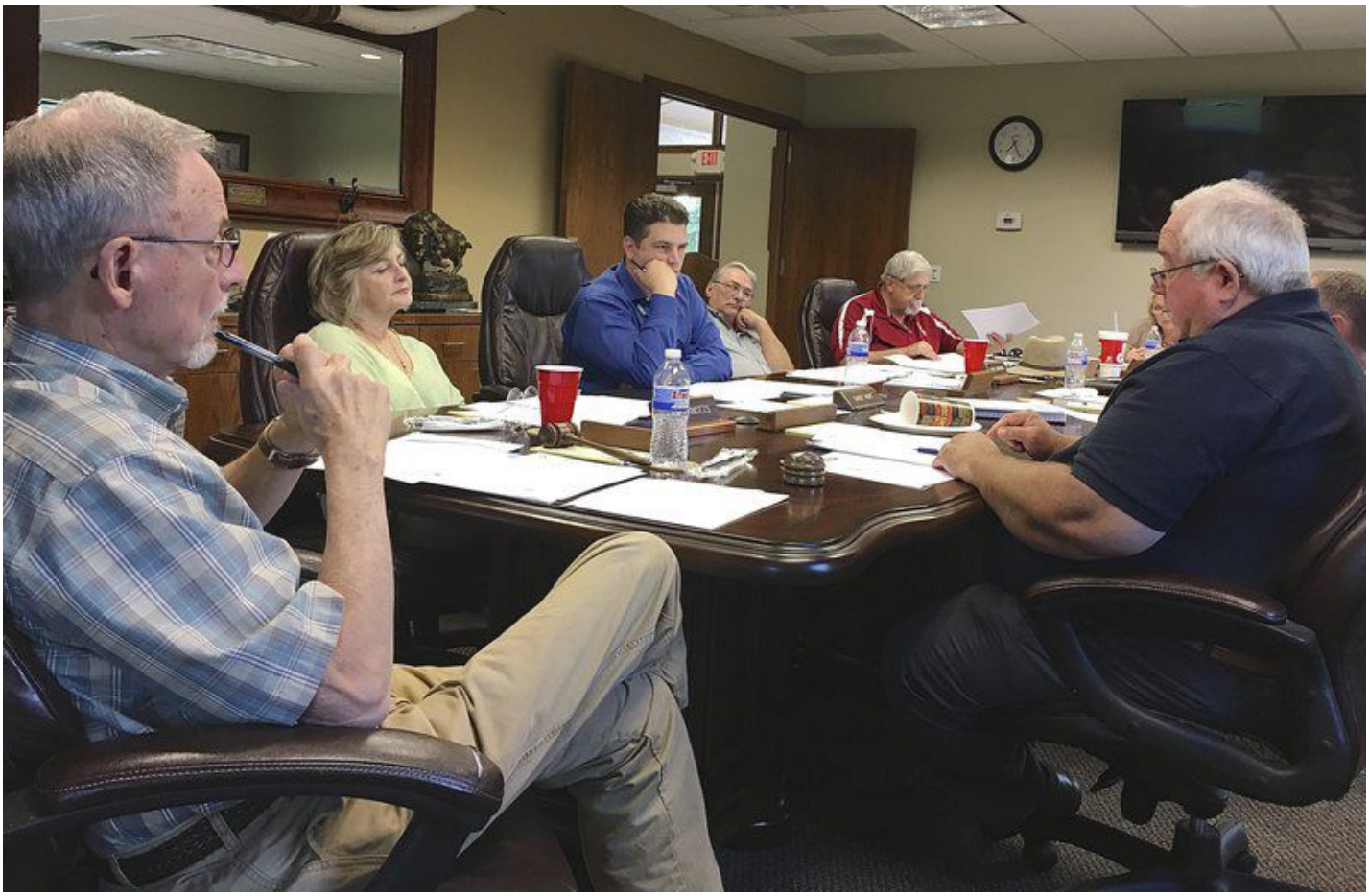
TOPICAL ALERT FEATURED

Reuse battle on hold

By Joy Hampton Senior Staff Writer 9 hrs ago



Central Oklahoma Master Conservancy District Board President Roger Frech, left, listens along with other board members as COMCD Manager Randy Wardon, right, reports on projects during the monthly meeting Thursday, August 9, 2018.

Joy Hampton / The Transcript

Midwest City, Del City and Norman leaders opened the door to conversations about reuse this month, delaying what was heating up to be a battle over water quality concerns.

“The three cities did get in a room together, and it was very civil, along with each city’s representative from the [Central Oklahoma Master Conservancy District] board,” said Del City Manager Mark Edwards. “The conversation was good. It was fluid.”

In addition to serving as city manager, Edwards also sits on the Central Oklahoma Master Conservancy District (COMCD) board. COMCD is the agency responsible for protecting Lake Thunderbird's water quality and delivering water to the three cities that use the lake for a portion of their water supply.

Edwards has been one of the most outspoken opponents concerned about Norman's path toward reuse of the city's wastewater as a means of augmenting the lake and bolstering long-term water supply. Edwards believes there are pollutants and other agents known as constituents of emerging concern (CECs) that could elude treatment and become a health problem if they made their way into the drinking water.

Norman city leaders believe augmenting the lake with highly treated effluent (wastewater) is a proven long-term means to bolster the city's water supply. Wichita Falls, Texas is one of a number of Texas cities currently using highly treated wastewater (reuse) as a water supply, either directly or through augmenting a lake.

"I have come to the conclusion that this is a political issue between the three cities," Edwards said. "There are two cities saying 'we don't like the idea' and another city saying, 'we've got to have this.'"

That third city, of course, is Norman.

Norman spent two years creating a strategic water supply plan to meet the city's water demand needs for the next 50 years. That process involved multiple committees, several public meetings and considered all possible alternatives for creating a long-term sustainable water supply.

"The end result was a portfolio that included drilling more water wells, increased attention to water conservation and water reuse," said Norman Utilities Director Ken Komiske. "Our water reclamation facility treats 11 million gallons a day of wastewater from all of Norman. We clean that, and we put that in the Canadian River, and someone down stream is putting that in their water supply to drink."

The thought process behind indirect potable reuse, is that Norman could clean its wastewater to a much higher degree and, instead of putting all of it into the Canadian, the city could discharge a small amount into a tributary leading to Lake Thunderbird when the lake level is low.

Norman city leaders believe that augmentation of Thunderbird could actually improve overall water quality. The water would still go through additional treatment when it leaves the lake, just as it currently does.

“We could have a drought-proof source of water and it would actually help clean up the reservoir,” Komiske said.

Edwards said the meeting with Mayor Lynne Miller was informative. Most surprising, was learning that Norman would only use treated wastewater to augment the lake when and if the lake level was low.

“The three of us were surprised by that,” Edwards said.

Miller met with Midwest City Mayor Matt Dukes, Del City Mayor Brian Linley and other city representatives including Edwards on July 23 to discuss Norman’s interest in a water reuse pilot project. To formalize those discussions, Miller followed up with a letter itemizing primary points about the pilot project.

Norman’s reuse pilot project would evaluate available technology, feasibility, time, cost and effect as well as collecting valuable data, Miller said in the letter.

Such a study will help determine whether indirect potable reuse or direct potable reuse is the best path to a reliable, safe water supply, she said.

Norman will fund the total cost for all planning, design, Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) permitting, construction, testing and data collection for the pilot project which would likely take two to three years from approval to final testing, Miller said.

One concern previously voiced by COMCD board members was that COMCD would be asked to foot part of the bill.

Further, Miller said no effluent (wastewater) from this initial pilot project will be discharged into Lake Thunderbird, rather it will be discharged to the South Canadian River under the current DEQ discharge permit.

Miller said a review committee would be set up with each city appointing two or three members from their community to follow the progress of the pilot project. The project will have have DEQ and Oklahoma Water Resources Board oversight. Additionally, Norman will try to secure additional technical overview from University of Oklahoma faculty and at least one other university or science-based institution.

Edwards said he wanted a review committee so the cities could select citizens to sit on the committee and report back their findings to city leaders. He believes the COMCD should not be making the decision on reuse.

“All the members of the [COMCD] board have been inundated with lots of information over the past few years,” he said.

Currently, Del City and Midwest City have resolutions in place against reuse and Edwards said that hasn’t changed. It will be up to the members of the review board to keep their cities informed about the reuse pilot project so the cities can make informed decisions in the future.