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Wetland study funds uncertain

By Janet Warford-Perry
For the Miami News-Record

The Rev. Bill Ritchie asked for divine intervention — that the people of Picher would disagree without being disagreeable — as he presented the invocation before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gave its presentation on a wetlands feasibility study.

And for the most part, residents of Picher spoke their peace and allowed those who disagreed to do so as well.

John Sparkman, chairman of the Tar Creek Basin Steering Committee, asked that people become involved by contacting their local, state and federal legislators as well as signing a letter to Gov. Frank Keating requesting the state match funds for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to perform the study.

Federal funding was approved last fall, but the project can't begin until the state agrees to in-kind or cash contributions totaling \$300,000.

But the letter to the governor asked that funding be released, even if it meant halting the current yard remediation work slated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Stopping the current yard remediation was met with opposition by Earl Hatley, who said that work should continue where there is exposure to children with elevated blood lead levels.

"There is no evidence that yard remediation has reduced blood lead levels. I fail to see how remediation on vacant lands is reducing blood lead levels," said Ed Keheley, spokesman for the Tar Creek Basin Steering Committee.

"I disagree," replied Hatley.

Two other parents, Aletha Redden and Terry Danley, and one grandparent, Gloria Garner, said their family members had received higher blood lead level test results following yard remediation.

Recent information presented to Picher Mayor Sam Freeman by TEAL (Tribal Efforts Against Lead) indicate that although blood lead levels had dropped nearly 50 percent in other areas of Ottawa County, testing done on children in Picher and Cardin reflected a lesser decline.

Other residents said their yards should be retested after the remediation to determine whether the lead content in fact had been reduced. Several said they feel recontamination from dusty chat piles, clay still being used on yards and water runoff is still an issue that should be monitored.

Freeman suggested the EPA continue remediation where children currently reside, but added it "could stand to let a few of those vacant properties go and use that money for the wetlands study."

Corps representatives said the wetlands feasibility study would provide a holistic solution to the health and environmental issues presented using a team approach that involved the entire community and state, as well as federal, local and tribal leaders, according to Gene Lilly, project manager for the Corps.

He said study guidelines would include the well-being of people, preventing loss of life, preservation of culture, building the economy and restoring the environment.

"Human concerns would come first," Lilly said.

Lilly said the first phase of the project,

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reviewing studies already conducted in the area and developing a comprehensive strategy, would take approximately six months to complete. The next phase, gathering any additional data, could take up to three years before a recommendation was sent to Congress for funding approval.

At the close of the last Oklahoma legislative session, the governor, senate pro-tem and speaker of the house sent a letter of commitment to the EPA promising to appropriate \$5.5 million for several Tar Creek remediation projects to be funded in conjunction with the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

A member of the Tar Creek Task Force, state Rep. Larry Roberts, D-Miami, said he is in favor of a wetlands study.

He cautioned, however, that the current state budget was facing a \$300 million shortfall beginning with the fiscal year July 1, adding that he'd seen prosperous and lean times and "this far exceeds any of the bad times I've seen in my 19 years in the Legislature."

"Why start piece-mealing a million here and a million there, when you can have a holistic solution," asked Ross Adkins, a press spokesman for the Corps.

One Picher resident, Gene Ragsdale, told Roberts he felt the people in Picher weren't being supported by Roberts and state Sen. Rick Littlefield, D-Grove.

Roberts said he'd attended many meetings in the area concerning Tar Creek issues, adding that Littlefield was unable to attend Monday night's meeting because of a conflicting meeting in Grove.

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