

Montcalm County millage proposal inching forward

■ *Group working to obtain commitments*

BY ELISABETH WALDON
DAILY NEWS NEWS EDITOR

STANTON — Supporters of a Montcalm County millage to fund local services have been receiving unpleasant but understandable feedback when presenting the proposal to residents.

“The initial reaction I get is, ‘Hell no,’” said Jed Welder, a Montcalm Conservation District board member and Greenville farmer. “The atmosphere with the county is so poisoned right now. But after you break through that there’s a little more willingness.”

Welder shared his thoughts during Thursday’s millage exploration gathering at the Montcalm Conservation District

office in Stanton. About two dozen people were present, including representatives for conservation, Michigan State University (MSU) Extension/4-H and parks/recreation. No representatives were present for animals or veterans.

The millage exploration group is looking to place a proposal on the ballot to fund those specific county services. Steve Wyckoff, a conservation district board member, is leading the charge and he reported on meeting with Montcalm County Clerk Kristen Millard to discuss costs and deadlines associated with a ballot proposal.

“The first thing she told me is we’re in uncharted waters here,” Wyckoff said. “No group in Montcalm County has ever tried

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this before without county involvement. It's really unfamiliar territory."

Millage supporters are looking to put a ballot proposal before voters specifically without the involvement of the Montcalm County Board of Commissioners, due to the ongoing legal investigation into the county's troubled financial situation. The ballot proposal would likely be a four- or five-year millage so voters could revisit the effort in the future. The millage amount has not yet been determined, but half a mill would generate \$875,000 in Montcalm County.

Wyckoff said if the millage group tries to finalize a ballot proposal for a special election this year, it would cost about \$53,400 for ballots, supplies, notices, election programming and local municipalities.

"That is prohibitive," he said. "There's just no way. If we had that kind of money, we wouldn't be sitting here looking for money."

Another more realistic option is to wait and get on the ballot during the next regular primary election in Michigan, which would be August 2018, giving the millage group a comfortable year and a half to complete groundwork. The group would need to make campaign finance reports and obtain legal counsel — ideally, affordable legal counsel — before circulating petitions for signatures.

"I think we need to start with the end in mind and make sure that we've got citizen support from within the county for this before we even start," Welder said. "I'd really like to see something that says if we build it they will come."

Jeremy Sova, a district conservationist, suggested mailing or emailing



Bonnie Ashbaugh of Edmore, MSU Extension District 8 Director Don Lehman and Don Smucker of Stanton share their thoughts after Thursday's Montcalm County millage meeting.

a survey with the goal of informing county residents about each of the five organizations, the services they provide and the reasons behind the millage proposal. Montcalm Conservation District Chairman Bruce Noll added the idea of creating an executive committee with a representative from each of the five organizations — animals, MSU Extension/4-H, parks/recreation and veterans — on the committee to come up with wording for the survey.

Thursday's meeting ended with Montcalm Conservation District Executive Director Judy Cloer planning to email officials with all five organizations in the hope they all will commit to the millage proposal and appoint one of their own officials to the executive committee.

"These are not new programs," said

Wyckoff of the five organizations. "These are programs that have received some type of financial help from the state and the county for some time. The Conservation District goes back to 1948. This is a coalition of organizations and entities within the county that, because of funding problems at the county level, have lost a lot of money that the county provided us for our operations.

"Sometimes you need to give up the past and let it go, but there are some things we just can't relinquish," he said.

Call the Montcalm Conservation District office at (989) 831-4606 for more information about the millage exploration group and proposal.

ewaldon@staffordgroup.com
(616) 548-8276