

Published January 28, 2012, 11:30 PM

## Diversion Discussion: Walaker's warning reignites divide between diversion supporters, opponents

FARGO - Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker admits there are a few words in his "State of the Cities" address that he probably shouldn't have said.

By: **Kristen Daum**, INFORUM

FARGO - Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker admits there are a few words in his "State of the Cities" address that he probably shouldn't have said.

Nearly three weeks ago, Walaker updated the area's business leaders about Fargo's ongoing efforts to secure a Red River diversion.

He also issued a direct warning to the project's opponents, which enflamed an already divisive situation.

"We want to do everything that we know possible to get us some permanent flood protection, and we need your support," Walaker said. "If it fails, I don't think anyone wants to go on the front page of The Forum as I point fingers at the people that basically stopped this project. That's a warning, as far as I'm concerned."

Several rural residents said they took Walaker's comments as a direct threat and a show of intimidation, spurring more animosity and distrust against metro leaders promoting the project.

The proposed

\$1.78 billion diversion could displace not only the residents whose land lies in the diversion's path, but also several communities south of Fargo-Moorhead.

Those rural towns sit in an area that's been designated to temporarily store excess water during times of severe flooding. It likely means residents in Oxbow, Hickson, the Bakke Addition and other nearby towns would need to be bought out.

Because of that, the project has drawn passionate opposition from affected residents, who continue urging Fargo-Moorhead leaders to seek a different solution.

"We have been striving hard to work with the mayor and his team to find common ground and a solution that provides permanent flood protection for Fargo that does not also require the destruction of our communities," said Nathan Berseth, spokesman for the MnDak Upstream Coalition, one of several rural groups organized in opposition to the diversion plan.

"We have made efforts to remain professional and reasonable," Berseth said, "so when the mayor made his bullying threats, it saddened and angered us."

Walaker told The Forum last week he realizes in hindsight his words touched a nerve. He said they were spoken out of frustration.

"Maybe it was a little harsh," he said. "Do I

wish I hadn't said it?

Ah, probably."

Walaker said the personal impact of the project is not lost on him or other metro leaders, but there's also a level of frustration about the manner in which opponents seek to make their voices heard.

"I've asked for it several times: If they're going to be against the project, that's their right, but the other problem is: Then, come up with a better solution," Walaker said. "There's certain factions out there that are just totally against the project, and my loyalty is to the 200,000 people in this community that depend upon this city for their livelihood."

Berseth said metro leaders have rejected solutions the residents have proposed, such as a basinwide retention approach they argue might render the diversion unnecessary.

Diversion Authority officials are studying ways to reduce impacts from the project, but they say retention alone will not adequately protect the Fargo-Moorhead area like a diversion could.

"Even with 400,000 acre-feet of retention, we get only 1½ feet of relief (in Fargo)," Walaker said. "That's not enough."

After three years of study, engineers are in the early stages of designing the 35-mile-long, half-mile-wide channel.

Walaker said residents need to understand the different phases of the project and realize nothing is set in stone.

"The design will pinpoint what can be done and what can't be done," Walaker said. "Part of the design is an opportunity to find a better solution. ... We will put all the pressure we can on the people doing the design to come up with a solution where we don't have to vacate Bakke, Oxbow and Hickson."

"I can't believe there isn't an opportunity to save those communities," through ring dikes or other means, he added.

The fury over Walaker's "State of the City" remarks reflects the continued disconnect between the project's supporters and its opponents, a gaping divide that doesn't inspire compromise or trust.

"No matter what we come up with, it's not good enough," Walaker said, reaffirming his belief that the diversion is the best option to provide permanent flood protection in Fargo-Moorhead.

"We all have to be responsible for what we say," he added, "and just because you're against it and you inform the different committees that you're going to try to stop it, that doesn't resolve the need of our communities."

Berseth said Walaker's warning strengthened the Upstream Coalition's support base and "our resolve to fight."

"We are not opposed to this project for the sake of being obstructionists," Berseth said. "All of us have a lot at stake due to the consequences of this (project)."

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Have a question about the proposed Red River diversion, or want to recommend a topic you'd like to see addressed in an upcoming column? Send an email to Forum reporter Kristen Daum at [kdaum@forumcomm.com](mailto:kdaum@forumcomm.com)(Subject: Diversion Discussion) or write to Kristen Daum c/o The Forum, PO Box 2020, Fargo, ND 58107. Please include your name, town and a phone number to reach you for verification.

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