



## Governors: Diversion task force unlikely to see consensus

By [Tu-Uyen Tran](#) on Nov 29, 2017 at 8:29 p.m.



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MOORHEAD — On the big screens at the front of the room was a colorful flowchart engineers put together in hopes of leading the Fargo-Moorhead diversion task force to a consensus.

There were six potential modifications to the \$2.2 billion flood-control project that the group was to methodically narrow down for the engineers to study further.

That didn't happen when the task force met Wednesday, Nov. 29, at Minnesota State University Moorhead. Members, made up of supporters and opponents of the project as well as other interested parties, spent much of their time sparring over just one of the modifications: Running more Red River water through the cities.

But the group is running out of time. Assembled by North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum and Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton to study project modifications that would satisfy Minnesota regulators and reduce impacts on rural areas outside the line of protection, the task force is supposed to make a recommendation after its next meeting.

Dayton, one of two task force chairmen, said after Wednesday's meeting that he never expected unanimous agreement. "Consensus to me means broad agreement."

Burgum, the other chairman, concurred. "This group was specifically chosen by Gov. Dayton and I to represent opposing views. And so we have all of the folks that have been active in opposition in the room and at the table and I think that's part of why this has been a good process."

## Ring dikes

An engineering team representing both the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and the Fargo-Moorhead Diversion Authority have worked for a couple weeks to study six modifications the task force initially suggested.

Diversion opponents, such as the Richland-Wilkin Joint Powers Authority that's sued to stop the project, has tended to favor options that downplayed or eliminated the diversion channel and dam, though such options had been studied and ruled out by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Jim Fox, a task force member from the JPA, did succeed in getting the engineering team to also look at a levees-only option, meaning surrounding the cities with ring dikes.

The team found costs would be comparable and there'd be less new land flooded, but the number of homes and businesses that would have to be bought out because they'd suffer excessive flooding would rise from 17 to 1,500, an 8,747 percent increase. In addition, Minnesota, which the Diversion Authority hopes will chip in just \$40 million for the diversion, would have to pay \$800 million for its own ring dike.

"I can't speak for Gov. Dayton, but I'm just going to guess that they probably would rather have a project cost \$40 million than \$800 million," Burgum quipped.

Dayton agreed.

That left five other options and several sub-options on the table.

## River depth

The most contentious option was running more water through town. The point of this is to reduce the amount of water needed to be held behind an upstream dam that's designed to reduce impact to downstream communities.

Early on, the diversion project was designed so that the Red River would not be allowed to be deeper than 30 feet as measured at the river gauge near Fargo's water-treatment plant. To reduce upstream impact, the Diversion Authority and the corps agreed to increase that to 35 feet.

Diversion opponents like Nathan Berseth, a task force member from the JPA, want to see what would happen if that went up to 39 feet. But other task force members prefer 37 feet because corps representatives at the meeting said they wouldn't be comfortable certifying any in-town levee to offer protection beyond 37.5 feet.

That set off rounds of verbal sparring like the one between Berseth and Col. Sam Calkins, who commands the corps' St. Paul District.

Berseth suggested the corps seems more comfortable with the "high-hazard dam," which diversion opponents have tried to frame as very dangerous.

Calkins said he is more comfortable with a high-hazard dam because it's designed to a much higher standard than in-town levees.

Berseth said the breach of such a dam could kill people, referring to the technical definition of a "high hazard dam" as one that could kill at least one person if it broke.

Calkins said a levee break in town would kill many people, but a dam breach many miles upstream would be less dangerous because the water would spread out across the plains before it reached densely populated areas.

After more sparring, Moorhead Mayor Del Rae Williams, the Diversion Authority's vice chairwoman, said she's fine with studying 39 feet if only to show that it wouldn't be a sound solution.

The engineering team's initial study has determined that the 39-foot option would reduce the amount of upstream land affected by 5 percent. It would also reduce the number of impacted upstream homes by 9 percent, for a total of 59 homes. But where the 37-foot option would increase project costs by \$150 million, the 39-foot option would increase costs by \$400 million.

## Other options

Other options the engineering team studied include: shifting the location of the dam farther north; extending it west to get a bit more storage in North Dakota and reduce Minnesota impact; allowing more flooding northwest of Fargo to reduce upstream impact; allowing more water to flow downstream, though limiting river level increases to no more than 6 inches; and shifting the diversion to just divert the Wild Rice River and not the Red.

In the absence of a clear consensus from the task force, engineers were instructed to mix and match as they see fit to meet several goals.

Among those goals, as laid out by DNR Commissioner Tom Landwehr, was to minimize the amount of land protected, as his agency prefers to protect as little land in the floodplain as possible because protection usually means shifting flooding to some other area. In the same way, he said, he wants to see if the dam's operations can reduce the times when water needs to be stored.

The task force is expected to convene in two to three weeks. Members discussed Wednesday how long they can delay their final meeting so the engineering team could complete the broad tasks ahead of it.



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