

NEWS

Private diversion meeting draws fire in F-M area

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At least two Moorhead City Council members object to the private meeting held this week between local leaders and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the proposed flood diversion.

Nancy Otto and Mark Hintermeyer were not aware the meeting took place Monday afternoon until just before the council meeting later that day. Now they are calling for transparency in the process.

"We need to work together, and it's pretty hard to do when we're excluded from meetings," said Otto, who sits in the Metro Flood Study Work Group. "If you expect our cooperation, then you need to act accordingly."

The corps initiated the meeting and invited mayors and staff from Fargo, Moorhead, and Cass and Clay counties to meet with Major Gen. Michael Walsh, who commands the Mississippi Valley Division of the corps.

Moorhead Mayor Mark Voxland said he didn't know before going to the meeting who was going to be in attendance. It was up to the corps to decide who to invite, he said.

The meeting's intent was to update the local sponsors, the cities of Moorhead and Fargo, on what the corps has been working on for the \$1.4 million project, according to the corps' public affairs office.

The corps also came to hear information on the newly approved Cass County sales tax, said Patrick Moes, a corps public affairs specialist.

The corps didn't send news releases about the meeting, Moes said.

Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker and Voxland both said no decisions were made at the meeting and that it was merely an update.

Hintermeyer raised similar concerns in April about a staff advisory group meeting that was closed to media.

"This causes enormous damage" to have some officials excluded from meetings, he said.

Walaker said each jurisdiction had at least one representative there.

And smaller meetings and phone calls between technical staff and the corps take place all the time, he said.

Voxland said none of the information he heard at the meeting was new, and he looked at it as a way for local interests to meet some of the newer corps officials.

Hintermeyer said he would have liked a council member present because Voxland typically only votes on council measures to break a tie.

"There is a difference between the mayor being there and the council being there," he said.

Hintermeyer also said he doesn't think city staff, such as the city manager, should attend meetings in which the press was not invited because it reflects on the council.

"There's an assumption that the council is also acquiescing to this closed-door policy," he said. "We are not. ... It's very frustrating to me."

Meetings in which the public is not involved lead to mistrust, Hintermeyer said.

"We have a number of communities that already are suspicious of the actions of the Moorhead council and the Fargo commission," he said.

Hintermeyer said the topic of staff attending private meetings will likely be discussed at the council's meeting on Monday.

The Metro Flood Study Work Group will hold a public meeting Nov. 18 in Fargo.

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