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## Diversion officials seek PR funds, fear public opinion may be swaying

FARGO – Diversion officials are worried they are losing the battle of public opinion.

By: [Erik Burgess](#), INFORUM

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FARGO – Diversion officials are worried they are losing the battle of public opinion.

The project's public outreach subcommittee will request funding at today's Diversion Authority Board meeting for a public relations campaign to fight off misinformation about the \$1.8 billion flood control channel – especially the site of its controversial "staging area," which would flood an area south of Fargo-Moorhead when the diversion is used.

"The people who have no data are winning the public argument," said Clay County Commissioner Kevin Campbell. "It's driving me crazy."

Under current plans, about 200,000 acres south of Fargo-Moorhead would be affected, including the small communities of Oxbow, Hickson and Bakke.

A pending proposal would build a ring dike to protect the area, but committee members say a "very vocal minority" of area residents argues the water could be pushed elsewhere, sparing the Oxbow/Hickson area.

Unfortunately, Campbell said, that ignores what study by the Army Corps of Engineers has found. If retention were moved anywhere else, Campbell said, it could affect anywhere between 600,000 to 1 million acres of rural land.

"The further away you take the storage, the less effective it becomes, so you need more of it," he said.

Campbell said he thinks "the whole idea" in opposing the location of the storage is to kill the project.

Outreach committee members were still uncertain how much money they would be requesting for an ad campaign, or how long it would run. They discussed writing more letters to the editor, buying newspaper advertising and hiring PR consultants.

"The plan is start using whatever we can to get the message out," said Rodger Olson, a Diversion Authority member.

Those details should be firmed up by the time the committee proposes the campaign to the full board.

The board is at a critical moment. The North Dakota House will decide on House Bill 1020, the state water commission budget, by the end of this month.

That budget includes \$102 million in flood mitigation funding for Cass County, and it should go to the state Senate in March for discussion, said Rocky Schneider, a public affairs strategist and diversion consultant. But some legislators in Bismarck are having a hard time seeing the diversion as a countywide asset.

"Gary Lee. (R-Casselton) said 'that's Fargo's project' ... not recognizing there's 139,000 people that are inside the area of protection and there's 10 or 12 communities," said Cass County Commissioner Ken Pawluk.

Schneider recommended that diversion supporters have one-on-one conversations with Senate members.

Outreach committee members said Wednesday they hope the proposed PR campaign would help.

"Our target right now is the legislators, but those legislators will listen to their constituents," said Tom O'Hara, a project manager and diversion consultant.

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