

State gives deadline for plans to replace Ragged Mountain dams written by Newspack Team | November 18, 2010



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RICHMOND — Despite

a plea

from a former water official to shut down the Ragged Mountain Reservoir for safety reasons, state regulators have granted an extension to the operating permit for the

Upper and Lower Ragged Mountain dams

used for the Charlottesville-Albemarle urban water supply.

The action was accompanied by a warning that if the community is not ready with construction permits to build a new dam by May 31, it could face unspecified enforcement actions.

At its meeting in Richmond on Thursday, the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board unanimously granted a six-month extension for continued use of the water supply reservoir through May 31. Conditions were added to accommodate a revised timeline specifying that the replacement dam's final design had to be completed by April 30, with the construction permits issued by the end of May.

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John Martin

, a former member of the

Albemarle County Service Authority

board of directors, traveled to Richmond to ask the board to completely revoke the permit for the dams, which were built in 1885 and 1908.

"My purpose is to attempt to bring pressure on the city of Charlottesville, in any way possible, to convince them to return to the 2006 water supply plan so we can get the Ragged Mountain dams repaired and so that we can proceed," Martin said. "Right now, my community is tearing itself apart

over this controversy, and I don't know where it's going to end."

"It's getting so bitter that it's affecting almost every aspect of the relationship between the city and the county," Martin added. "I thought it was time to go to the state and ask for help."



John Martin testifies before the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board

Martin resigned from the ACSA board in September

, saying he wanted to be free to lobby state officials to build support for the 50-year

community water supply plan

, which was approved by Charlottesville and Albemarle in 2006. He resigned immediately

after a joint meeting

in September where the localities were unable to agree on how or whether to revise the long-range plan for the reservoir.

Albemarle's Board of Supervisors still backs the original plan, which calls for an earthen dam to be built downstream of the existing dam raising the reservoir pool vertically by 42 feet. The ACSA is now paying for that dam's final design.

Charlottesville's City Council

favors a plan

that would build a taller dam in two phases, with a second height increase to be built only if it is deemed necessary to satisfy future water needs. The city also wants consideration given to dredging of the

South Fork Rivanna Reservoir

and to building on top of the existing dam as a potential

cost-saving measure

.

Any replacement dam is expected to address safety concerns that have been unresolved since inspections in 1978. The board questioned

Thomas L. Frederick Jr.

, executive director of the

Rivanna Water & Sewer Authority

, about the timeline for building the

earthen dam

avored by Albemarle.

"I am working very hard, as hard as I can, to figure out a resolution to what are some political differences in the community at the present time," Frederick said. "I would not characterize the differences as jeopardizing the progress that has been made to date with respect to the repairs for the Ragged Mountain dams, but certainly I can't deny that it has the potential in the future, if some political decisions aren't made ... to prevent us from being able to meet some future milestones."



Board member Daphne W. Jamison asked Frederick about the public's understanding of the safety problems.

"Is the public aware that the dam does not meet safety requirements as it is now?" Jamison asked.

"We certainly have done everything we can do ... to try and communicate that reality that something needs to be done," Frederick responded.

Steve Snell, a dam safety engineer with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, informed RWSA staff in July

that he was concerned to hear city officials had concluded the existing dam was safe.

After his message, a

conceptual study

was completed for the city by

Black & Veatch

in July

. It indicates an enlarged dam could be built 35 to 45 feet higher on top of the existing 1908 Lower Ragged Mountain dam.

In an interview Thursday, Snell was asked if his opinion on the dam's safety had changed as a result of Black & Veatch's findings.

"The state and federal government have maintained the same concerns about the safety of this dam for the last 30 years," Snell said. "If it floods out, it will destroy 50 homes downstream and probably cause loss of life."

"Thirty years of debate is enough; the localities need to take action. This is not like the Meadow Creek Parkway, where it is a road that's not a hazardous situation. This has gotten to the point of almost negligence," Snell added. "Any decision they come up with that makes the dam safer will be acceptable to us, but that should be made at the local level."

After the board's decision, Martin said he thought they were "paying attention and listening carefully."

"I think they will be watching very carefully as we proceed," he said. "I understand their decision and it's something we can work with."

As Frederick left the meeting, he noted that the board had raised the issue of consequences if the revised timelines are not met.

"If we pursue the city's interest in raising the existing dam, we don't know how long that would take," Frederick said. "There is the potential that it could take longer to do the preliminary and final designs, beyond the deadline just given by this board."

Snell said that enforcement actions could include canceling the operating certificate, forcing the community to lower the reservoir to a safer level, emptying the reservoir entirely, or requiring an alteration permit to immediately build a safer spillway.

"We prefer not to dictate conditions; we prefer to work with localities. But if it comes down to enforcement, the board will decide what that will be," Snell said. "We just really want them to have an adequate spillway for that dam."

The next meeting of the RWSA board is scheduled for Nov. 23 to receive input from a panel of dam experts who are reviewing the city's Black & Veatch concept for enlarging the existing dam.