Public Hearing and Minutes of the Little Fork River Watershed Policy Committee

Date: Thursday, September 24, 2026, 10:00 am
Location: Cook Community Center
510 Gopher Dr., Cook, MN 55723
Subject: Public Hearing on the draft Little Fork River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan and Policy Committee Meeting
Chair: Chuck Bainter, North St. Louis SWCD
Recorder: Pam Tomevi, Koochiching SWCD
Public Notice: 9-10-2026

Policy Committee Members Present:
Chuck Bainter, Chair / North St. Louis SWCD Supervisor
Destry Hell, Vice Chair / Koochiching County Commissioner
Loren Lehman, City of Littlefork Deputy Mayor/Councilor
Cal Saari, Itasca SWCD Supervisor
George Aitchison, Koochiching SWCD Supervisor
Liza Root, City of Cook

Steering Committee Members Present:
Pam Tomevi, Koochiching SWCD
Matt Gutzmann, Itasca SWCD
Phil Norvitch, North St. Louis SWCD
Whitney Sims, Koochiching Environmental Services Department
Jolen Simon, Koochiching SWCD
James Aasen, Koochiching SWCD
Andy Arens, Itasca SWCD (online)

Advisory Committee Members Present:
Jeff Hrubes, BWSR
Chad Severts, BWSR (online)

Others Present:
Rachel Olm, Houston Engineering, Inc.
Mitch Brinks, Maps by Mitch
Bill Cina
Kathie Cina

Chair Bainter noted the presence of a quorum and called the meeting to order at 10:02 am.

Welcome and Introductions

Members and guests present and online introduced themselves.

Review Agenda

2026/9-1 **Motion by Lehman, seconded by Root to approve the agenda as presented. Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root. Absent for Vote: Aitchison.**

Review June 25th Meeting Minutes

2026/9-2 **Motion by Lehman, seconded by Hell to approve the 6-25-2026 minutes as presented. Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root. Absent for Vote: Aitchison.**

Plan Overview Presentation

Rachel Olm, Houston Engineering introduced herself and gave a PowerPoint presentation on the planning process, community and committee involvement, resource topics, and highlights of the draft plan goals and objectives. Questions were invited; none were received.

Open Public Hearing

2026/9-3 Motion by Lehman, seconded by Root to open the public hearing.
Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root. Absent for Vote: Aitchison.

Chair Bainter requested Tomevi read the following guidelines for the Public Hearing:

Guidelines for Public Hearing will ensure that all in attendance are treated respectfully and courteously and that all who desire to speak will have the opportunity to be heard.

A sign-in sheet will be used for each person who wishes to make oral comments. Anyone who wants to do so must enter their full name and address on the sign-in sheet in the spaces provided.

1. Public Comments: Anyone who wishes to speak must sign in on the sign-in sheet with full name and address in the spaces provided. The chairperson will review the sign sheet and call each person to speak. Upon recognition, the person must identify by clearly stating their full name and address.

2. Questions: The Chairperson will take questions from the floor. Questions will be asked solely to obtain information about the subject matter of the public hearing or to clarify its provisions.

3. Each person who agrees to speak has three minutes to address the policy committee.

Written Comments Received:
None were received.

Oral Comments Received:

- Jeff Hrubes, BWSR: *This planning process went really well. Folks were engaged. There are more communities in this plan and that's a great thing to be involved in this plan. The staff did fabulous work and consultants produced a great product. It's been overall a great process, Policy Committee members have been actively engaged and I thank them for that.*
- Cal Saari, Itasca SWCD Supervisor: *Board would like to thank the staff and consultants and those working on this- you've done a tremendous job. I am a part of four watersheds and feel each is an improvement on the last. We extend our appreciation for the work to create this great document we can present to BWSR.*

Close Public Hearing

2026/9-4 Motion by Hell, seconded by Saari to close the public hearing.
Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root. Absent for Vote: Aitchison.

Plan Comments Section

Tomevi reviewed the Formal Review Comments and Response table. Discussion also included confirmation of Clean Water Land & Legacy logo on the cover of the plan.

Draft Plan Approval

2026/9-5 **Motion by Root, seconded by Hell to approve the Little Fork River CWMP final draft plan and forward it to the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and local boards for approval.**
Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root, Aitchison.

1W1P Timeline & Budget Review

Tomevi reviewed the planning timeline and provided a budget update as of 8-31-2026. There is a projected surplus of ~85,000 in planning dollars and the Steering Committee has been discussing options for use of those funds. Tomevi informed the members that remaining planning funds may be used to help inform or assist with implementing the plan including data collection/information gathering.

Utilize Remaining Funds

Tomevi reviewed the following proposed projects:

- City Stormwater Retrofit Analysis
  - Contracted analysis and report via hired consultant for the City of Cook and the City of Littlefork to identify potential areas where projects can be installed to reduce pollutants
  - Estimate: ~ $59,000 with hydrological modeling
- Littlefork Ravine Restoration Feasibility Study
  - Contracted engineering to assess priority areas and feasibility of ravine restoration in the Little Fork River Watershed
  - Estimate: **TBD**
- Well and Potable Water Study
  - Recent request received from Koochiching ESD - not previously discussed with the Steering Committee
  - Survey developed and mailed to landowners and businesses and final report compiled
  - Estimate: $10,000 to $15,000

Tomevi asked the Policy Committee for their support on draft revisions to the work plan and budget and commented that, as the fiscal agent, the Koochiching SWCD Board will approve final revisions once recommendations are finalized through and supported by the Steering Committee/BWSR.
Root thanked the group for including the cities in the proposed use of planning dollars for stormwater analysis.

2026/9-6 **Motion by Lehman, seconded by Root supporting the draft revisions to the work plan and budget, utilizing the projected ~$85,000 in remaining planning funds with final recommendations to be forwarded to the fiscal agent Board for final approval as recommended by the Steering Committee and reviewed by BWSR staff.**
Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root, Aitchison.

Wrap Up

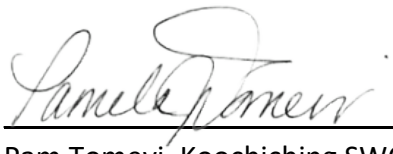
- October: Seek partner board approvals of the draft plan; Tomevi will send out necessary documents to partner boards.

- November/December 2026: Northern BWSR Committee/State BWSR Board approval.
- January/February 2027: A new implementation MOA will be signed.
- February 2027: The new Policy Committee will tentatively meet on 2-18-2027 to review the draft watershed-based implementation funding application (date to be confirmed).
- On or before April 30, 2027: Implementation funding application due.

Adjourn

2026/9-7 **Motion by Hell, seconded by Saari to adjourn the meeting at 11:14.**
Voting yes: Lehman, Saari, Hell, Bainter, Root, Aitchison.

Submitted:



Pam Tomevi, Koochiching SWCD

PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE

Little Fork River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan

The Little Fork River Watershed Planning Partnership, including Koochiching Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Koochiching County, North St. Louis SWCD, St. Louis County, Itasca SWCD, Itasca County, City of Littlefork, and City of Cook is holding a Public Hearing on the draft Little Fork River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan.

The hearing will be held at **10:00 am on Thursday, September 24, 2026** at the **Cook Community Center located at 510 Gopher Dr, Cook, MN 55723**.

This Plan was out for 60-day review from June 26 – August 25, 2026. The purpose of this hearing is to make available the comments received during the 60-day comment period. All persons are invited to attend the hearing and submit comments, written or verbal, that will become part of the official public hearing record. These comments will be considered when making final revisions to the Plan.

A copy of the draft plan can be found at: https://koochichingswcd.org/lfr_1w1p/. Additional comments may be submitted at the public hearing or in writing by **Tuesday, September 22**, to the Koochiching SWCD Office - 501 3rd Street, Suite 100, International Falls, MN, 56649, or via email to ptomevi@koochiching.gov.

For more information, please contact:

Pam Tomevi, District Administrator
Koochiching Soil & Water Conservation District
501 3rd Street, Suite 100 * International Falls, MN 56649
ptomevi@koochiching.gov
218-283-1174

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Local kids start school well equipped

UWNEMN REPORT

Ninety-four Koochiching County students started the school year equipped with new properly fit athletic shoes, school supplies, and haircut certificates thanks to the community's support of United Way of Northeastern Minnesota's Step Into School program.

Step Into School applications were open to all students enrolled to attend school in Koochiching County (K-12) this fall living in households under the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) guidelines. These guidelines were set using the latest United for ALICE in Minnesota report which shows 11 percent of Koochiching County residents live in poverty while another 22 percent are ALICE, earning above the federal poverty guidelines but still struggling to afford basics.

All participating families said Step Into School removed a financial barrier for their households.

"I can barely survive as it is financially," said one parent. "If my child receives a pair of shoes through this program then I know she is good for the school year on those, and I can focus on paying for a good and warm pair of winter boots. This program takes a lot of pressure off of my shoulders."

Additional pressures were relieved this year thanks to collaborations with House of Joy Salon & Studio and KOOTASCA's Learning Tree program; Step Into School students received haircut certificates to redeem at the salon before the year ends as well as a backpack filled with school supplies.

"We know a child's education has significant ties to adult health and success," said UWNEMN Executive Director Erin Shay. "These community partnerships make the program more holistic which means more support today for an even brighter future for these children and for our region."

While the impact is serious, the program itself is lighthearted, starting with a community meal, "Minute to Win It" games with community leaders, and a ride from Backus Community Center to Ronnings in an emergency response vehicle.

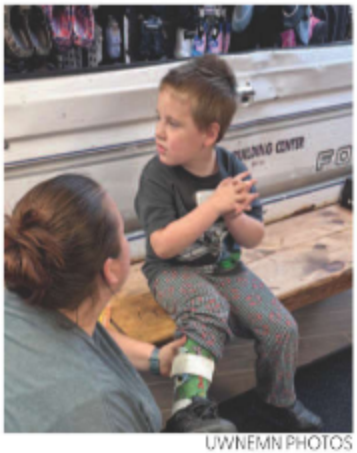
Since 1966, the United Way of Northeastern Minnesota (UWNEMN) has worked to serve the needs of individuals and families on the Iron Range (Northern St. Louis County and Eastern Itasca County), Koochiching County, and Lake of the Woods County. The organization's mission is to unite and focus our communities in creating measurable results to improve people's lives and strengthen our families. For more information, visit www.unitedwaynemn.org.

UNITED WAY Northeastern Minnesota STEP INTO SCHOOL

Applications will open for the 2027 program in May. Learn more at www.unitedwaynemn.org/step.

This is the fourth year UWNEMN has partnered with Backus, Ronnings, and local emergency responders and law enforcement on a back-to-school shoe event.

Step Into School is offered free in Koochiching County with support from Old National Bank Foundation, Essentia Health, MIDCO Foundation, Packaging Corporation of America, Rotary Club of International Falls, TruStar Federal Credit Union, Border Bank, Sanford Health, and Rainy Lake Gazette, as well as funding from the Power of the Purse event. In addition, Ronnings provides a discount on shoes.



UWNEMN PHOTOS

Local students shop for new school shoes at Ronnings through United Way of Northeastern Minnesota's Step Into School program.



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Little Fork River WATERSHED

EVENT	TIME	EVENT DATE	LOCATION
Public Hearing	10:00 am	9/24/2026	Cook Community Center 510 Gopher Drive Cook, MN 55723

NO	NAME	PHONE	EMAIL
1	Matt Gutzmann		Matt.gutzmann@ItascaSwcd.org
2	Cal Saari	218-969-0151	
3	Loren Lehman	278-4245	JMZ@Frontiernet.net
4	Destry Hell	218-244-2234	
5	LIZA ROOT	218.410.3141	liza.root@cityofcookmn.gov
6	Chuck Bainter	218 404 4113	chuckb@sahgehet.com
7	Jolén Simon	on file	on file
8	Jeff Hrubes	218-368-7687	Jeff.Hrubes@State.mn.us
9	Mitch Brinks	218-820-9502	
10	Whitney Sims	218-283-1158	WSims@Koochiching.gov
11	Phil Norvitch	218-288-6145	phil@nslswcd.org
12	Bill & Kathie Cina	218-741-7206	BANDKCINA@yahoo.com
13	Pam Tomeri		
14	James AASEN		
15			