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NEWS

County council won't meet with Inglis about Patriot's Lake

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When it comes to the Patriot's Lake project, Union County Council will meet with U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint but not with Fourth District Rep. Bob Inglis.

Supervisor Donnie Betenbaugh presented council with a letter Wednesday from Inglis to William Stein, deputy district engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, thanking him for agreeing to participate in a meeting at 10 a.m. March 20 at the Upstate Workforce Investment Board in Union. Inglis states that Stein will answer questions about the Corps' study on the possibility of a regional water supply reservoir in Union County with priority given to questions from members of the councils and the study committee.

Despite the promise of priority given to their questions, council instructed Betenbaugh to inform Inglis they would not attend the meeting. Council will instead meet with DeMint at a later date to discuss the lake. In a letter to Inglis, Betenbaugh cited DeMint's neutrality and interest in getting the facts about the project before making a decision on it.

"We will be attending the meeting with Sen. DeMint and do not find it necessary to attend both meetings," Betenbaugh states. "His staff has assured us that he is more than willing to offer a neutral position on this project and he is interested in fact-finding before making a determination of direction."

Betenbaugh added that it was DeMint who helped the county get the Patriot's Lake project moving forward by securing federal funding for the Corps' concept study of the lake.

"Sen. DeMint is the reason this project is where it is today," Betenbaugh said. "He, as (Fourth District) congressman, was the one that had the funds allocated - the \$175,000 - to the Corps of Engineers. So he is definitely is due the respect and he needs to be part of this process of deciding what direction this project goes."

Council member Dora Martin said she saw no need to meet with Inglis as he has made clear his feelings about the lake.

"It's no point in us going to a negative meeting, because he has said that lake was like building a bridge to nowhere like the one in Alaska," Mrs. Martin said. "So it is useless to go listen to that again. I see no point in going to hear that again. If we're going, we're going to listen to something positive about the lake, but we know how he feels about it."

In a March 4 speech to the Union Rotary Club, Inglis compared the lake to the proposed Gravina Island Bridge in Alaska which was labeled the "bridge to nowhere" by opponents. The project would have linked Gravina Island (population 50) with the town Ketchikan (population 8,900) at a cost of \$320 million. Thought canceled in 2007, the bridge has become a symbol to many of pork barrel spending and cast an unflattering light on congressional earmarks.

Patriot's Lake, which would be formed by damming Tyger River and Fairforest Creek, is projected to cost

\$187 million. Proponents have touted it as a source of water for the Upstate, an economic and recreational boon for the county and a source of hydroelectric power. It is opposed by coalition of environmental groups who have instead called upon the county to develop the Tyger River without damming it to create a the lake.

The concept study by the Army Corps of Engineers found that while technically possible, the lake was not justified economically. The study concluded that the Upstate has sufficient supplies of water to meet its needs until 2030.

The study's conclusions have been criticized as flawed by the lake committee, the county and other lake proponents. Many have pointed out that the combination of continued growth in the Upstate and persistent drought that has forced neighboring counties to limit water use and dried up local creeks are proof that the lake needs to be built as soon as possible.

Lake committee

The lake committee also met Wednesday and also decided against meeting with Inglis.

"I told Congressman Inglis and his office that I just didn't know what useful purpose a meeting at this point would serve," chairman William Jeter said. "I also told him that had he been involved in this process all along like I encouraged him to get involved we wouldn't be at this impasse at this time.

"That doesn't mean that he doesn't have the responsibility as our congressman to ask questions and be involved in the process," he said. "He did not get involved the whole time we had this study by the Corps of Engineers in his congressional district."

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