

## City of Adrian buys trio of parcels to protect drinking water supply

By Julie Buntjer

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ADRIAN — More than 20 years after building a water treatment plant to remove nitrates from its drinking water, the city of Adrian is nearing completion on some land purchases that will further its efforts to provide safe, clean water for its residents.

The city was awarded a not-to-exceed \$426,591 grant late last year from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources to protect its roughly 2,300-acre high priority wellhead area, which is located mostly outside the city limits to the east and south of Adrian. The grant can be used for land purchases — covering up to 90% of the appraised value — as well as any restoration work that will aid in the protection of groundwater. The Kanaranzi-Little Rock Watershed District has also contributed \$89,617 toward the project.

Since the grant was awarded, the city of Adrian has purchased 26.5 acres from Pat and Cammie Dorn at a cost of \$212,000, with a larger parcel — 32 acres from the Morganthaler family trust at a cost of \$241,600 — awaiting a title opinion before the purchase goes through, according to Adrian City Administrator Jill Wolf. The appraised value of the properties is slightly lower than the purchase price, Wolf noted.

“It’s a proactive measure,” she said of the land purchases. “The city has already taken other proac-

tive measures by blending our wells.

“This is just the next step. It’s a natural filtration so we can protect drinking water now and into the future.”

The Morganthaler piece surrounds the city’s three existing wells, referred to as Nos. 5, 6 and 7. All are shallow wells with depths ranging from 37 to 51 feet and are located on the north edge of town on property framed by Interstate 90 to the north, Minnesota 91 to the west and Nobles County 35 to the south.

All of the properties surround unnamed streams that feed into the city’s wellhead.

“We’ve been working on this wellhead area for a few years with cover crops,” said Nobles Soil and Water Conservation District Manager John Shea.

Once the purchase of the Morganthaler property is completed, he will work with the city to develop a conservation plan for the city-owned land. The plan will be overseen by the SWCD board, and will ensure the land never returns to production agriculture.

“We don’t want money to stand in the way of drinking water,” Shea said.

The Morganthaler property was leased to the city for the past two years, after an existing Conservation Reserve Program easement had expired. The city allowed for the land to be hayed, and Shea said that will likely continue.

“The only restoration

or seeding will be on the south (Dorn) piece,” Shea said. “The other parcels have grass on. Grasses are great at removing nitrates.”

If the city wants to create a walking path on the property, that is also permissible.

“As long as groundwater is not being affected, we can have more freedoms,” Shea said.

Early on in Shea’s work with the city, he invited Laura DeBeer, a water resources technician based at the Pipestone Soil and Water Conservation District who assists six counties in southwest Minnesota, to help involve landowners in the quest for cleaner water.

DeBeer is working with area landowners to reduce nitrates in the wellhead protection area.

“We have gotten several Department of Health implementation grants, where we cost-shared or helped incentivize cover crop plantings,” DeBeer said of efforts during the past four years that have led up to the land purchases. “We’re trying to target land closest to the wells.”

In addition to encouraging cover crop plantings to reduce nitrate leaching,

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DeBeer has been working with landowners on other nitrogen-reducing techniques, including split applications of nitrogen.

While everyone realizes the importance of clean water, DeBeer said asking landowners to alter their



farming practices isn't always easy.

"It needs to make sense for a producer's operation," she said. "Every operation is different — you have different crop rotations and different needs when it comes to livestock."

It isn't that farmers aren't receptive to making changes that can improve the water supply, but it takes time to figure out the learning curve and what will work for each specific farming system.

When she started having these conversations with farmers four years ago, there was a limited selection of equipment that could be used for interseeding cover crops. Also, the highline wires along I-90 created concerns for doing aerial seeding of cover crops.

Now, as more equipment options are available for seeding, DeBeer hopes to see an expansion of cover crop plantings.

The efforts thus far have proved successful. Adrian Public Utilities Superintendent Adam Henning said nitrate levels have been declining in the past few years.

"I don't know if it is from a combination of different practices we have been implementing (producers planting cover crops and haying

the Morganthaler land), or if it is weather related," Henning said.

With positive results, though, the hope is the progress toward clean water will continue.

"There's always hope to work with more landowners in the Drinking Water Supply Management Area to reduce nitrate use," said Shea. He's working with the Southwest Prairie Technical Service Area to also look at filtration of tile lines before the water reaches the wellhead.

"We will always have projects in our sensitive shallow aquifers in

southwest Minnesota," added DeBeer.

Adrian Mayor John Faber commended the city's three-member Public Utilities Commission for their efforts to pursue the land purchases to protect the city's drinking water supply.

"They looked at the Morganthaler and Dorn land and put a plan together," he said. "They're the ones that are most caring and know what's best for the people of Adrian."



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Adrian Mayor John Faber (from left), City Administrator Jill Wolf, Nobles Soil and Water Conservation District Manager John Shea and Adrian Public Utilities Superintendent Adam Henning stand on a parcel in the process of being purchased by the city. The land has an unnamed creek flowing through it that leads to the city's three wells. With native grass plantings, the goal is to reduce the level of nitrates that reach the stream and ultimately the city's wells.