

Credit River, Savage establish framework for utility services

By Nancy Huddleston

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Does Credit River Township want to become a city, be annexed into a neighboring community or stay a township?

That question has not been answered yet, but one thing's for sure – no matter what option township resident choose in the future, they will need water and sewer services.

So Savage and Credit River Township officials recently signed a joint powers agreement that provides options in regard to the potential expansion of city services to portions of Credit River Township. It also lays out how the two government entities can work together in the future.

When the Savage City Council unanimously approved the agreement Sept. 7, Savage Mayor Janet Williams acknowledged there have been rumors for years that Savage has wanted to annex parts of the township, but those are not true.

“Whether or not this document will take care of the rumors, I’m not sure,” she said. “The residents of Credit River need to understand that either they stand alone, stay where they are and become a city or someday become part of the city of Savage.”

Discussions between the two government bodies have taken place for about five years, which has added fuel to the rumor that Savage wants to annex Credit River, city officials acknowledge.

But the joint powers agreement only fosters the idea of “cooperative planning and shared services,” said City Administrator Barry Stock. It does not lay the foundation for anything else.

“The agreement formalizes the city’s long-standing position regarding our desire to allow Credit River to determine its own fate with respect to remaining a township or incorporation,” Stock said. “The agreement also notes that in the event the property owners petition for annexation into the city of Savage that the city will not oppose the petition providing it is in the best long-term interest of the city.”

The township board also approved the agreement Sept. 7.

Township Supervisor Bruce Nilsen calls the agreement a “gentlemen’s agreement in writing.”

What’s more, the joint powers agreement with Savage gives the township another piece to consider as it continues to study incorporation.

“We need to be ready,” said Township Supervisor Brent Lawrence. “If we do get to the point where we need services, this gives us options.”

Nilsen said trunk water and sewer line for municipal services currently ends at Redtail Ridge Elementary School on 154th Street, and township officials are eager to know where it will go next.

“It depends on development,” he pointed out, “But we hope there’s a northern loop to serve the township and we continue to talk with city officials about that.”

The joint powers agreement provides the framework for those discussions, Nilsen said, explaining that it also takes the pressure off township officials to make any decisions quickly about incorporation.

A few years ago, developers were champing at the bit to get residential projects in the ground. That prompted township officials to step up their efforts to plan for how they wanted development to proceed.

“The study about incorporation and if it was a benefit to residents was going faster a few years ago,” Nilsen explained. “But with the slowdown of the economy, that’s given us time to slow down and look at everything closer. In a way, it was a blessing in disguise.”

As the township board’s self-professed “devil’s advocate,” Nilsen said he continues to ask tough questions because although deciding to become a city sounds simple, it’s quite complicated.

“Are we becoming what we are trying to avoid?” Nilsen asks, “People will say we don’t want to be taken over by Savage, but are we willing to become a city to avoid that?”

Along with that perplexing question, Nilsen said the township must consider all the costs involved in incorporation, which not only include paying for water and sewer services, but also its share of road construction and maintenance costs, fire and police services and planning and zoning.”

“So we’re fortunate that Savage has been so willing to work with us because their willingness gives us time to further examine if we want to become a city and if it’s the right thing to do,” he said.

Future

The Metropolitan Council set aside the northern portion of Credit River Township within the urban services area, which means development may occur at a higher density and would need urban sanitary sewer services that are controlled by the Metropolitan Waste Water Commission.

Mayor Williams points out that Credit River residents cannot annex into Prior Lake because there isn’t enough capacity in that city’s sewer and water system.

“They also need to understand that there are costs to add capacity and it will be paid for by Credit River Township, not Savage residents,” said Williams.

Councilwoman Christine Kelly said while she respects that township residents and officials have a tough decision to make regarding the future of their community, she wondered how much more effort and investment Savage needs to make in saying it doesn't want to annex the township.

“We've been spending legal fees to get this in writing to reassure people what the expectations are for the city and township,” she said. “How much more are we going to spend to reassure people that we aren't doing what they think we're doing?”

Lawrence acknowledges that concern is out there; however, the township board is trying to be proactive instead of reactive in terms of development needs.

Nilsen agrees and said the discussions are still ongoing to answer the incorporation/township question. And the continued dialog with Savage is a part of that process so that everything is on the table.

The joint powers agreement doesn't tackle what the future governance of the township will be, Lawrence said. “But there is a question of how we can provide city services and how we can pay for them, so this agreement gives us some answers,” he said.

Another part of the discussion between the township and city over the years is the impact of Prior Lake Aggregates' plan to redevelop its gravel pit. A large section of the mine is in Savage, but the expanded mine area lies across the road in Credit River township.

A joint powers agreement dealing with zoning and planning issues along the border was signed by city and township officials about 18 months ago, so that development scenario can be planned for in the future, too.

The city is currently undertaking a feasibility study to analyze the location of both trunk sewer and water lines in south Savage to accommodate future development and the associated growth.

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