

Lake district idea buoys hopes of businessman

By Steve Engelbert
The Janesville Gazette Staff

NEWVILLE--Shirtless days on the Rock River and Lake Koshkonong have burned Jack Seaver brown as plowed earth.

Grizzled hair spills from Seaver's cap, and a white beard frames his face. Whatever his habits, his voice hints of whiskey and cigars.

Jerry Richardson calls him the old man of the sea.

"You don't look like Babe Winkelman," Richardson yells at Seaver across the 30 yards between Richardson's big pontoon boat and Seaver's little yellow fishing boat.

And Seaver shouts back over the slap of the waves and the mutter of his outboard motor. "I'm a hell of a lot better fisherman than him."

Maybe Seaver does hold an edge on the famous television angler. As Richardson and his passengers watch, a walleye puts a big arc in Seaver's rod. The bronzed fisherman fights the fish to within a few feet of the yellow boat.

But the walleye spits the hooks, and the rod straightens. Seaver curses. Richardson laughs.

Then he heads the big, square craft north, away from Newville and Seaver and into the lake.

* * *

Richardson points back to the narrow place where the Rock River flows out of the lake toward Indianford.

"That's what made the lake," Richardson says. "It's a natural dam."

The narrows made Koshkonong, but the Indianford Dam made the lake what it is: Wisconsin's eighth-biggest lake at 10,467 acres and a playground for scores of boaters, anglers, swimmers, sun-bathers and campers.

It made Richardson's business, too: Harbor Recreation, a marina at Newville. Richardson and his employees repair, sell and store boats there.

And now Rock County has suggested that it might remove the dam because of mounting repair bills and a lack of support from Jefferson County, which has the vast majority of shoreline.

Talk of removing the Indianford Dam, no matter how farfetched, gets Richardson's attention.

"There's a chance, and that chance is enough to motivate me," Richardson says.

If the dam goes, the lake would shrink to 7,500 acres from its present 10,467 acres and from its present average depth of 5 feet to 3 feet, Richardson estimates.

"That would put an end to a lot of this activity," he says.

Take away the dam, and the old man of the sea won't be trolling for walleyes. Richardson won't be selling boats.

Richardson figures the answer just might be a lake district.

* * *

"Mister, want to see my sand castle?" says a small boy on the beach at Lakeland Camping Resort.

The kid leads a man to the line where the water darkens the beach. He shows off a raised, fat circle of wet sand with a stone-lined moat in the middle.

A little farther down, a mother hauls a tiny, naked boy out of the shallow surf.

Big boats come and go, and Randy and Julie Cloyd of Rockford, Ill., watch the bathers and boaters from a golf cart parked in the shade near the road to the beach.

"I hear they're going to tear that dam out, and then there won't be any lake," says Randy Cloyd, who rents trailer space at Lakeland. "That dam is privately owned."

Cloyd is wrong about the ownership issue. The residents of Rock County own the Indianford Dam. As to whether the elected officials of the county will decide to destroy the dam, John Torstveit hopes with all his heart that Cloyd is wrong about that, too.

Torstveit, one of four partners at Lakeland, thinks Rock County officials speak foolishly when they talk about removing the dam.

"Tourism pulled Michigan out of the doldrums, not manufacturing," says Torstveit, while activity in his general store at the resort entrance hums around him.

And tourism is an essential part of Rock County's economy, Torstveit says. He ticks off statistics to support his view.

"They (tourists) spend a lot of money in the area--\$150 million a year," he says. "We are the 10th largest county for tourism in the state. Rock County employs over 10,000 people in tourism, and the centerpiece of tourism in Rock County is Lake Koshkonong."

Torstveit figures tourism in Rock County contributes \$14 million in taxes to the state and \$10 million to the county. The money comes from income taxes, gasoline taxes, property taxes. His renters shop in the Janesville Mall and at

Piggly Wiggly in Edgerton.

"They buy trailers up here, boats up here," Torstveit says.

Like Richardson, Torstveit figures the way to keep the Illinois visitors coming might be to form a lake district.

* * *

"Channel" says the word painted on the side of the bridge, and Richardson, back from the lake and heading south in the river toward Indianford, pilots the boat right for it.

He points out the John Hurd farm. Hurd owns a stretch of the north river shore that features sandstone cliffs. Hurd has elected to leave the land undeveloped, and trees--not houses--cover the tops of the cliffs.

"This has been a favorite fishing spot for years," Richardson says. "Kids bicycle out here to fish. I think even Sterling North mentioned coming out here to fish."

He points to where Indians dug holes into the face of the cliffs long ago. The holes, nearly obscured by the summer foliage, are called "Devils Ovens." Richardson doesn't know what their purpose was. He climbed the cliffs and entered the holes as a boy and found the air inside strangely warm, he says.

The boat glides toward Indianford Dam. Richardson holds the boat steady in the current, upstream of the cable strung across the river to keep boaters from going over the dam. Round orange floats bisect the cable at intervals.

The county has threatened to remove the old dam and the red brick powerhouse. That threat has galvanized Richardson and the others to form an organization that will tax them to save the lake.

* * *

Richardson and a steering committee have labored since December to establish a district, and the district might still be more than a year away. A legal description has been completed.

Now the committee will try to get petitions to all the potential members before Sept. 1. Many of the lake property owners are summer residents, and Richardson wants to get to them before they leave.

The organizers want 85 or 90 percent approval, Richardson said. The new district, with power to tax and spend, will go from the Jefferson city limits to the Indianford Dam and will encompass the lake in between.

The district won't own the dam or pay all of the costs for it, despite the wishes of Rock County, Richardson says. He presumes district members will want to help with part of the dam costs.

"If I read this right, the county wants to dump all this on us," Richardson says.

But lake and river residents already pay higher taxes because of the water.

Rock County must fix the dam soon, as ordered by the Department of Natural Resources. Rock, Jefferson and Dane counties always will bear the major financial responsibility for the dam, Richardson says. The lake district interests have finally got officials from the counties talking, he says.

"It will all boil down to the counties getting together and sharing some of the costs," Richardson says.

The district will handle various other lake improvement projects: build ramps; place riprap on endangered shorelines; pay for carp eradication; help pay for a lake safety patrol.

The lake already has associations of business owners and sports-minded people that collect money to give to such causes as the Bark River Hatchery, which plants walleyes in the lake.

But the district will give the lake interests a unified voice, Richardson says.

And with the threat to the dam, to property values and to livelihoods, the time for unity is now.

[Close Window](#)