

Survey says: Protect Geneva Lake

(Published Tuesday, April 24, 2007 11:02:50 AM CST)

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FONTANA-The Geneva Lake Conservancy hopes a property owner survey in the Geneva Lake watershed will help policymakers and builders make development decisions.

Jim Celano, conservancy director, said policymakers must realize that decisions they make affect local natural resources, such as groundwater and open land.

What still must be determined is the impact of development on Geneva Lake, Celano said. Right now, no one knows the tipping point between ecology and economy, he said.

The conservancy commissioned UW-Whitewater's Fiscal and Economic Research Center to survey watershed residents between September and December 2006. The goal was to determine the economic impact of Geneva Lake and residents' attitudes toward the lake.

Geneva Lake's watershed hugs the shoreline. Most of Lake Geneva and almost all of Walworth are outside the watershed, as is part of Fontana and as much as a third of Linn Township.

UW-Whitewater economics professors Russ Kashian, Mark Eiswerth and Mark Skidmore, who is chairman of the department, discussed the survey results at a press conference Monday at the conservancy offices in Fontana. Some results had been released in March.

About 1,600 surveys went out, and 492, about 30 percent, were returned.

That alone was surprising, Eiswerth said. The survey had about 75 questions along with maps and graphs. That so many were completed shows that residents have a tremendous interest in Geneva Lake and its future, he said.

The survey found Geneva Lake is an economic engine. It accounts for \$321 million in annual spending and 2,904 jobs.

"That's money that would not be here if the lake were not in a healthy state," said Chuck Ebeling, who was conservancy chairman when the survey was being done.

Among the surprises is that almost 88 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that communities around Geneva Lake need to cooperate to protect the lake, and about 77 percent agreed or strongly agreed that a lake management district is a good idea.

Celano said that seeing a majority of residents in favor a new layer of government to protect water quality came as surprise.

The watershed still has tens of thousands of developable acres, Celano said, and the conservancy is not taking a no-growth attitude, he added.

"What we're saying is, let's be more intelligent. Let's understand what we're giving away," he said.

Among problems facing Geneva Lake is impervious surfaces, such as roads and rooftops, that come with development and may divert water from the watershed.

How development happens-as suburban sprawl or well-designed conservation subdivisions-will determine the future of Geneva Lake as an economic engine, Celano said.

Survey details

What: Survey sent out by the UW-Whitewater Fiscal and Economic Research Center to residents living in the Geneva Lake watershed.

When: September to December 2006.

Who requested: Geneva Lake Conservancy, a nonprofit lake quality group.

Why: To determine the economic power of Geneva Lake, and what residents would do to maintain the lake's current quality of life.

How many: The watershed has 13,867 taxable properties. Surveys were sent to 1,610 homeowners. Of that, 492 were returned.

Averages:

-- Age of respondents: 54. (Average adult age in Walworth County is 49).

-- Respondent income: \$200,000. (Average county income is \$45,000).

How much: Geneva Lake generates \$321 million in annual spending, \$57 million in labor income. There are 2,904 jobs in the regional economy created by the lake, roughly 15 percent of the total jobs in Walworth County.

A similar study done recently on nearby Delavan Lake showed it generates \$80 million in spending and 812 jobs annually.

Some responses (questions paraphrased):

-- A common vision should be formed through inter-jurisdictional cooperation that has some influence on development around the lake. Strongly agree: 62.5 percent. Agree: 25.5 percent. Disagree: 2.3 percent. Strongly disagree: 3.5 percent.

-- A formal lake management district would serve the interests of the community with regard to management of the Geneva Lake watershed. Strongly agree: 46.3 percent. Agree: 30.7 percent. Disagree: 2.3 percent. Strongly disagree: 3.5 percent.