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Koshkonong Management Plan discussed at meeting

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NEWVILLE - A grassroots informational session about the Lake Koshkonong Management Plan took place last week in Newville.

Held at Fin's Bar and Grill, the gathering allowed those gathered to discuss issues surrounding the cleanup of Lake Koshkonong, and possible solutions to high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus contributing to pollution as well as silt levels and erosion problems.

It was organized by former members of the committee that formed the Consolidated Koshkonong Sanitary District, former Secretary Judy Nelson of Edgerton and former Chairman Mary Lou Clift now of California.

Several ideas were discussed on how to tackle the pollution problems and concerns about how the lake has changed over the years. The two main ideas discussed were dredging the lake and erecting man-made islands, as well as getting more residents off of private septic systems that contribute to nitrogen levels, and into the sanitary district.

About two-dozen people showed up, representing various boards, towns, residential areas and former residents concerned with the status of the lake.

An official discussion with engineers and legal consultants will take place at 9 a.m. Saturday, July 30, when the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District (RKLD) holds its annual meeting at Fort Atkinson High School.

During that meeting, the proposal to dredge and build islands on the lake will be discussed. All residents or property owners within the lake district are encouraged to attend.

Representatives from the cooperative process between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), RKLD and the Army Corps of Engineers will be present, as well as the hydrology firm Montgomery Associates Resource Solutions.

Wednesday's gathering began with a discussion led by moderator Clift about the current status of the lake. Clift, who played a large role in petitioning for the sanitary district during the 1970s, noted that when she had been young and had a family connection to Charley's Bluff, the lake was clear enough to see the sand on the bottom.

"I'm not here to tell you how to dredge your lake, but after being on a pontoon boat ride with Tom Sherman the other day up and down the lake and the river, it's very obvious that we need a deeper lake," said Clift.

Clift also noted that in 1969, the Army Corps of Engineers quoted the cost for a dredging project at around \$10 million. Paperwork from the Koshkonong area a year ago quoted \$5 million.

Dave Brown of the Rock County Town of Fulton Board of Supervisors, who also represents the township on the lake district board, noted that many different groups of people were getting involved with the project in these early stages.

"About two year ago, the chairman of the RKLD, Brian Christianson, saw the need to do some planning for great improvements to the lake. At the time, he was able to enlist the aid of Mike Sheridan, who was the speaker of our Legislature at the time. Speaker Sheridan was able to make arrangements to get a planning grant," explained Brown.

"The state would put in money that would fund the planning effort, hiring consultants and such. The corps of engineers would provide expertise," he continued. "They've been doing feasibility studies; they've been trying to find out what the impact of any improvements we do would be on Native American culture and artifacts. The DNR was going to come on board, and they're not contributing money, but they're contributing time and writing our environmental impact statements."

Brown noted that many of these preliminary studies seemed to point to the need to dredge the lake, and building that island from the spoils. Brown warned that building an island out of the fine silt would not withstand the forces of nature, so it would need to be contained by a substantial structure.

Brown also addressed the need to reform and work the sanitary district, which could be expanded to lower pollutants entering the lake through leaks in septic systems.

Prof. Herman Felstehausen, a retired University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who worked with the Water Resources Management project, led a discussion on the history of the creation of the lake district and the sanitary district, and its effects on the lake.

According to Felstehausen, the sanitary district was formed due to the amount of sewage that was entering the lake from residents' wastewater-disposal systems.

"The Rock River basin is a huge area collecting a large amount of waste water. When that drainage reached Lake Koshkonong in the earlier years, and then after World War II a lot of people decided it would be wonderful to have a vacation dwelling on Lake Koshkonong, a lot of concerns arose, not just because of sewage water, but because of agricultural runoff using more and more fertilizers, which completely polluted the lake," explained Felstehausen.

During the early stages of creating the sanitary district, one of the larger problems related to consolidation of at least seven different local governments: the Rock County Town of Milton, the Town of Fulton, the Dane County Town of Albion, the Jefferson County Town of Sumner, and Jefferson, Dane and Rock counties.

"This sanitary district provides one of the models for solving rural sewage district problems when the lake district arrangement was starting to become more active and popular," said Felstehausen. "But Lake Koshkonong is a rare bird because the point of the lake is in three counties and it's in four towns, actually more, if we would go all the way up to Fort Atkinson. There was nothing in Wisconsin law that said, 'how can such a diverse collection of local governments get together and contract with each other to legally undertake something as expensive as constructing a sewer system and building a treatment plan?'"

Felstehausen said that, while there were hurdles, the sanitary district was created, and it has significantly and positively impacted the health of the lake.

After the group broke for lunch, Frank Micale, commissioner for the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District, answered questions from residents, property owners and others present.

"Basically what they want to do is build an island out of the lake bottom materials on the north end of the lake, use some of that dredge material to riprap or bolster the shoreline to protect that wetland and to rebuild the carp gate. That's up to the people in the district whether they want to approve that project," explained Micale.

Any reclaimed land made from the lake bottom most likely would become property of the State of Wisconsin, and strictly regulated by the DNR.

"They've talked about doing it two ways: They can either come in and vacuum up the bottom material and put it in something to hold it, or the one other thing that they thought would be less expensive would be to draw the lake down in the winter and literally go out there with mechanical means and build the island that way. None of this is set in stone," said Micale.

He stressed the protection of the wetlands around the lake.

"Mud Lake is not going to be part of lake Koshkonong; it's going to be part of that marsh if we don't do something soon," Micale pointed out. "It's probably the most productive hatchery for our fishing for our northern on the lake, it's the largest wetland on the lake, so it's important that we address those concerns if we're going to do a dredging project, that the shoreline gets looked at as part of the project."

Micale noted that there were options to help fund the project beyond burdening taxpayers with the full cost.

"Yes, the taxpayers in the district are going to be on the line to pay for it. We can get help from the State of Wisconsin financially. Any money that we get from outside the taxpayers in the district will reduce what the people in the district have to pay, so it's to our advantage to get as much outside help as we can," said Micale, noting that there might be options through organizations that help protect wildlife and ecological areas.

According to Micale, while dirty water from residences not plugged into the sanitary district is contributing significantly to the nutrient imbalance of the lake, a substantially larger problem arises from farmfield runoff entering the lake from the 3,000 square miles of drainage area. He highly stressed that pollution problems would not be solved without the cooperation of agricultural interests.

"The sanitary district that is in place has not cleaned up Lake Koshkonong because we have 3,000 square miles of drainage above that lake that is dumping more nutrient into that lake than you'll ever see," said Micale. "It's a nutrient load that's astronomical. That's what causes the lake to be green and stinky, the nitrogen and the phosphorus."

Discussion among the group addressed how both pollution from the drainage basin and wastewater from in-use systems not hooked up to the sanitary district were seriously impacting the lake, contributing to the same problem of nitrogen and phosphorus buildup.

Attendees encouraged all residents, renters, property owners who are part of the lake district to attend the annual meeting on July 30, where the proposal for the dredging plan will be discussed at length and put before the district for approval.

"Engineers will be there to answer the technical questions; they should have a good idea as to what the cost will be, and it will be up to the people at the annual meeting to say 'yes,'" said Micale.