

Lake Onota Guardian

A periodic publication dedicated to the preservation of Lake Onota, Pittsfield, MA

Winter 2006

Inside:

Commentary:

Burbank Park? ..Pg. 4

Progress in 2005...Pg. 5

Onota notes.....Pg. 6

Yes on three foot drawdown...but more ???

By Lew Cuyler

The 5 ½ foot drawdown that LOPA believes is key to winning the battle against milfoil infestation remains elusive as 2005 merges into 2006. A three foot drawdown, however, is assured.

The chief roadblock involves concerns of the Massachusetts National Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP) over the effect a deeper drawdown would have on endangered species, concerns that LOPA says it and other parties have addressed. The Massachusetts Heritage program, a state agency, administers the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act.

Both Bob Race, LOPA president, and Dick Laureyns, LOPA activist, insist that a deep drawdown plan developed earlier this year by a team of lake management professionals and approved by city agencies, as well as subsequent submissions in response to NHESP requests, have addressed endangered species issues in detail with a plan that provides for their protection..

"Heritage and the weather will determine the outcome of this year's drawdown, but we will have at least a three foot drawdown," said Laureyns.

He and Race, along with a number of lake management experts, agree that drawdowns are the cheapest and most effective ways to rid lakes of milfoil, the cloying weed that has substantially interfered with boating and swimming on Lake Onota, in spite of a previous effort to clean up the lake using herbicides.

Deep drawdowns expose milfoil to the deep freeze of winter without the insulation provided by water. The deep freeze then kills the milfoil plants, effectively blocking re-growth.

And while a drawdown sounds as simple as pulling a plug



Unidentified treasure hunter seeks rewards at city beach in early December when drawdown had reached the approximate three-foot level.

from a basin of water, it is not. Both Laureyns and Race express frustration at the complexities of the process, referring to the LOPA proposal's two-year tortured effort to find favor with a covey of state and local agencies concerned with lake management

They say that last year, 2004, was the first in several that a full three-foot drawdown was accomplished. And that was because volunteers cleaned the fish screen at the Lake Onota Dam off Lakeway Drive on an almost daily basis beginning in late November 2004.

The job required closing the two foot gate on the dam, work that involved turning a stubborn valve

handle 96 times to open and close, cleaning milfoil and other debris from the screen face, and making attempts to clean the clogged headwaters to the dam.

In early summer of 2005, the effect of the drawdown was combined with other efforts including spot herbicide treatments of the badly infested areas and some hand harvesting. The result was a much cleaner lake this past summer but one where large patches of milfoil were still evident.

Modern History

The modern history of the war against milfoil began in early 2004 with a committee of Race and Laureyns, along with LOPA members the late Tom Armstrong, Dorothy Mara and Jane Winn. Joining them were Dennis Regan of the Housatonic River Assn., Jim McGrath, the Pittsfield parks executive, and Tom Matuszko and Melissa Jette of the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission. Together they developed a long-term management plan with the aid of Dr. Ken Wagner, a professional lake management expert.

(Continued on Page Two)

Drawdown

(Continued from Page One)

The committee concluded that a 5 1/2 foot drawdown would expose approximately 280 of Onota's 617 acres; that the process should be completed every three years; and the effort should be buttressed with spot herbicide treatment, and mechanical harvesting and hydro-raking.

They did not know that the effort for acceptances of their plan, now nearly two years old, had just begun.

The initial plan required approval from the Pittsfield Conservation Commission, NHESP and the state's Department of Environmental Protection. (DEP)

The Pittsfield Conservation Commission approved the plan in November 2004, but only after a long hearing. NHESP, however, disapproved, some say without adequately or seriously considering the information provided by LOPA, the Conservation Commission and Mayor James M. Ruberto.

2004-05 drawdown

There followed visits to the lake by NHESP officials who upheld their previous disapproval despite documentation provided by LOPA and other deep drawdown advocates that their plan addressed the endangered species issues. Instead, NHESP sought more specific information about the effect of a drawdown. LOPA and city spokespeople say they provided the information but NHESP did not respond. The city then requested a review of the situation by the state DEP. Finally, on Dec. 17, 2004, NHESP granted approval for the three-foot foot draw-



Jim McGrath, the Pittsfield Park Commission's executive who is also harbormaster for Lake Onota, stands triumphant over removed fish screen at Onota outlet pipe. Screen clogged outlet during 2004-2005 drawdown requiring near daily cleaning.

down but again denied the request for 5 1/2 feet.

In January the Berkshire Environmental Fund awarded the city a \$25,000 grant to develop an Invasive Species Management Plan that would meet the requirement from the Massachusetts Heritage for more information.

Subsequently a team of lake experts and hydrologists concluded that the LOPA-city plan for a 5 1/2 foot drawdown would not harm the rare and endangered plant life in the north end of the lake. Last spring, the team studied the fish population of Onota, and, in particular the "Bridal Shiner," a small species previously identified as endangered. None were found; the team concluded the Shiners had become victims of predatory fish.

The fish sampling was accomplished using guidelines provided by Massachusetts Fish & Wildlife.

The resulting study – 150 pages entitled "Onota Lake Invasive Species Management Plan – was submitted to NHESP in May. The city and LOPA then complied with a request to submit further information regarding the professional qualifications of the team that developed the plan.

On June 29 NHESP approved spot herbicide treatment but



By early December approximate three foot drawdown had exposed good-sized portion of bottom just north of Controy Pavilion, one of the shallower sections of Lake Onota.

(Continued on Page Three)

Drawdown, cont.

again remained silent on the proposal for a 5 1/2 foot drawdown.

Complicating the process was a change of personnel at NHESP, a situation that prompted requests for more submissions of information

On a related matter, the city's Conservation Commission in July approved the removal of the fish screen from the outlet pipe, thus making it easier to achieve the potential three-foot drawdown and the yet-to-be-approved 5 1/2 foot drawdown.

Three-foot permit

In October, NHESP issued a permit for a three-foot drawdown, but with conditions that would prevent the city from following the deeper drawdown plan developed earlier in the year. These included requiring re-installation of the fish screen that had been removed; drawing down in November only, thus effectively preventing a 5 1/2 foot drawdown; and maintaining three feet of water in areas identified as habitats of endangered species even though some of the areas have less than three feet of water when the lake is full.

On Oct. 17 the city began the three-foot drawdown, complying with the existing permit. By early December a three-foot drawdown was accomplished on several days but then rain brought the lake level up again.

Just before *The Catch* went to press the city received a memo from NHESP rescinding the major unacceptable conditions it had previously imposed thus leaving room for negotiations with the Conservation Commission for a final order of conditions that would allow a 5 1/2 foot drawdown in future years.

"We'll now cross our fingers for a positive result from this year's successful three-foot drawdown," said Bob Race.



Remnant of fabric barrier used in earlier attempt to prevent milfoil from spreading lie exposed during current drawdown. In background is BRASS boathouse.

Whom to call on lake issues

LOPA Executive Committee

President - Bob Race	443-1681
Vice President - Marshall Raser	443-2732
Treasurer - Gail Light	445-7566
Clerk-Dorothy Mara	447-9867

LOPA Area Representative Directors

Tor Court - Marshall Raser	443-2732
Westwood - Dick Reinhart	499-7132
West Street - Jim Hashim	499-7543
Blythewood Drive - Chris Light	445-7566
Pecks Road - Andy Kelly	443-7705
Thomas Island - Jim Ditello	499-0122
Lakeway/Bakers Is.-- Jack O'Brien	553-3136

Commonwealth of Massachusetts:

Sen. Anthony Nuciforo	442-6810
Fish & Wildlife Andrew Madden	

LOPA At-Large Directors

Lew Cuyler	496-9160
Tom Dailey	442-1724
Dick Laureyns	499-1017
Bob Quattrochi	443-2554

City of Pittsfield

Mayor Jim Ruberto	499-9321
Parks Dept. Jim McGrath	499-9343
Public Works-Bruce Collingwood	499-9330
Conservation-Caleb Mitchell	499-9359
Councilman Anthony Maffuccio	499-4633
Councilman Dan Bianchi	443-0180

Rep. Christopher N. Speranzo	447-7225
	447-9789

Commentary

Don't let Onota become an endangered species

By Lew Cuyler

For the past few years LOPA has focused its efforts on fighting the milfoil plague which has threatened to destroy the lake, but has given only passing attention to the much less visible threat of development of trophy homes and commercial enterprises.

As 2006 begins, city officials will begin to address the future of Burbank Park and Lake Onota through an update of the city's Open Space and Recreation Plan. LOPA will have the opportunity for input into that update. And that means that LOPA's membership should participate by going to hearings and making opinions known.

First, some background to provide context for these observations:

During the fall the topic of land use in Pittsfield abruptly surfaced with the YMCA's proposal to sell its Ponterril tract abutting Pontoosuc Lake to a developer who plans a 350 unit time-share condominium project.

The proposal aroused the East Acres Road neighborhood that adjoins Ponterril. Neighbors organized a protest. They initially sought a scaledown; more recently it appears they want to scuttle it entirely. The uproar has forced the city to review its zoning laws regarding commercial development in residential neighborhoods.

The relationship between the YMCA, Ponterril and Pontoosuc Lake has a history of stewardship through the offering of recreation that goes back to the early 1900s. Ponterril's use in recent years has diminished; the YMCA boathouse is in disrepair; the YMCA is pinched financially, all conditions that have made Ponterril's potential sale attractive.

So what does this have to do with Lake Onota?

Ruth Bass, who writes a weekly column for *The Berkshire Eagle*, suggested on Dec. 5 that the Ponterril-YMCA-Pontoosuc situation should be a wake-up call.

"It's hard not to worry about what happens if a developer offers an enticing sum for Camp Stevenson, Camp Winadu," she wrote. "Not everything should be covered with driveways and houses, because once that road is taken there's no return trip."

She might also have mentioned the tract owned by Hillcrest Hospital at Onota's southeast end. Or the ongoing development off Churchill Street and more houses on the west side of Blythewood Drive, with owners presumably seeking lake access.

Then there's the question of the future of the city-owned Burbank Park. For about a year there has been talk in Park Commission circles about the need for a Burbank Park master plan that would address future use and present problems

of security, upkeep, and unregulated motorboat traffic.

In an interview in early December, Mayor James M. Ruberto made it clear that his administration would not endorse any plans for the park without the guidance of a master plan. He added that no master plan is in the works because the city does not have the money to pay for one. He expressed hope that the city might qualify for a grant that could pay for such a plan but that possibility remains elusive.

In another interview, about a year ago, the mayor said that Burbank Park had to develop a source of revenue to underwrite better upkeep and security.

In the meantime two or three ideas relating to the park's use and potential revenue for upkeep have surfaced. They have included a city-owned campground that would provide revenue; user fees for boaters; a marina; and a community boathouse. None have gone anywhere.

Quite clearly the time for a Burbank Park/Lake Onota master plan is overdue.

While such a specific plan unfortunately is not in the cards, the city has moved to update its Open Space and Recreation Plan that was written in 1994. It won't be the same as a master plan, but will represent a departure point.

Jim McGrath, the executive for the Pittsfield Park Commission, will work with his associates at the city's Department of Community Development and the Berkshire County Regional Planning Commission, in developing the update.

He assured *The Guardian* that part of its focus will be Burbank Park and Lake Onota.

He said there will be at least one public hearing, probably in April, for various interests to provide input. If more hearings

are needed, they will be scheduled, he said.

He acknowledged that the plan will not focus specifically on Lake Onota. But he did say that he fully expected the plan would provide an important departure point for a future master plan focused on Burbank Park and Lake Onota.

Land use problems have a way of sneaking up on public resources. Developers are opportunists who make bets on the future. Those concerned with the future of Burbank Park and Lake Onota cannot afford to wait. They must prepare.

A first step is to keep abreast of the implications of the Ponterril controversy for Lake Onota. A second step is to follow developments in the update of the open space and recreation plan, and to attend the public hearings.

There should be no excuse for losing Lake Onota and Burbank Park.

(Lew Cuyler is the founder of BRASS, a non-profit community rowing club that uses a city-owned boathouse at Burbank Park. He is the editor of the Lake Onota Guardian.)



Burbank Park

(Photo: Berkshire Visitor's Bureau)

President's letter**2005 was lively chapter in LOPA's lake rescue campaign**

I want to start this message by wishing everyone interested in Onota Lake a **HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

LOPA has had a relatively busy and fruitful year thanks to the numerous hours contributed to the cause by so many of you. I salute you and thank you! I only wish more of you would let my wife know about your hours so we can factually document how much we do contribute. I'll end this letter with a summary of 2005 events as it will appear in our annual report

But we have no time to rest on the oars. We have a challenging year ahead of us, with a hopeful conclusion of the two-year quest to permit a deep drawdown, the necessity to weigh-in to the City of Pittsfield relative to additional chemical treatments, the need to obtain financing for enhanced dam outflow capability for both safety and drawdown purposes, the continuation of our water quality and weed monitoring and Burbank Park clean-up and beautification programs, and the exciting prospect of major contribution to City's Open Space and Recreation Master Planning (including a Burbank Park Master Plan) under a \$25,000 "Smart Development" grant we helped the City obtain.

This all means there are ample opportunities for many more of you to find a niche that interests you and step up and join the ranks of LOPA volunteers.

In 2005, we....

The following is a brief summary of noteworthy 2005 LOPA activities:

--Five meetings of the Board of Directors open to all members, including our Annual Membership Meeting and election of officers meeting;

--Our fifth annual Burbank Park Clean-up in May under Marshall Raser's leadership;

--The third year of our Burbank Park Beautification Program under the leadership of Tom Stowe and Jim Ditello;

--Spring installation and Fall removal of the obstruction marker buoys under Jack O'Brien and Ray DuFresne's leadership;

--Continuation of the Water Quality Monitoring Program under Bob Race's leadership;

--Continuation of the Macrophyte Monitoring Program under Dick Laureyn's leadership;

--Hand-pulling of over 120 gallons of the invasive Water Chestnut weed during two volunteer sessions organized by Dick Laureyns;

--Assisting the Berkshire Rowing and Sculling Society (BRASS) in conducting its annual Bernie Ryan rowing regatta on the lake;

--Working with the City and Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) to complete a scientifically supportable five year "Onota Lake Invasive Species Management Plan" conducted under a \$25,000 Berkshire Environmental Fund Grant and designed to protect the rare and endangered species while conducting deep drawdown and other management activities to combat the scourge of Eurasian watermilfoil;

--Supporting the City in the continuing attempt to get Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program to allow deep drawdowns;

--Continuing the distribution of the LOPA Onota Lake Welcome and Safety brochure;

--Providing volunteer support to the City's contractors hired to conduct the Mass Fish and Wildlife mandated electro-shocking and seining fish surveys as a prelude to a deep drawdown;

--Designating a volunteer (Lew Cuyler) as LOPA's liaison to the Parks Commission. Lew has been attending their Monday night meetings as our representative;

-- Helping the City and BRPC submit a Smart Growth Technical Assistance Grant application which resulted in a \$25,000 grant for

"Pittsfield Lakes Watersheds Smart Development". LOPA will assist in implementing this grant and developing the guidelines appropriate to encouraging development while protecting Onota Lake (and the other City lakes);

--With many hours of work by Ray DuFresne and Dick Laureyns, LOPA now has an up-to-date listing of all waterfront property owners for communications regarding lake activities.

I and the Board are all committed to making LOPA represent its members and help the City preserve Onota Lake for all to enjoy in the future. I look forward to your participation in this endeavor.

Robert W. Race, President



Bob Race, standing, triumphantly shows his haul of water chestnuts during pull-out party in July. With him is boatman Jerry Krupka.

LOPA Meeting: Jan. 11, 2006, 7:15pm

Bob Race, LOPA President, has announced that the next open meeting of the Board of Directors will be held at the Springside House, Pittsfield on Wednesday, Jan. 11, 2006 at 7:15 p.m.

"This is an important meeting where we set the agenda and priorities for the coming year", he said, "and it's also every member's chance to have a voice in making the right thing happen."

The meeting agenda will include an update on the plans for deep drawdown in 2006.

"If you care about the lake and we all do," Race added, "then, ~~make~~ plans to attend the meeting and contribute your brain-power to the difficult process of preserving beautiful Onota Lake!"

Lake Onota
Preservation Association Inc.
P.O. Box 2884
Pittsfield, MA 01202

--Notes from around the lake--

Dues up to \$10; members sought

The LOPA Board of Directors voted Oct. 26 to raise the annual dues for membership in the association from \$5 to \$10. The meeting and the action followed a general membership meeting where dues level was a topic of discussion.

The consensus was the association wants to increase its membership which now stands at 156, down from 212 last year, a 212 percent drop. However, no one believed that a modest dues increase would have an impact on recruitment efforts.

Bob Race noted that at one time membership was about 300.

An effort to recruit new members will be made by a phone squad consisting of Marshall Raser, Jim Ditello and Bob Quattrochi.

In the meantime all members received a membership/gift envelope in the December mailing of the Oct. 26 minutes.

Beautification

Tom Stowe, Jim Ditello and Carl Peaslee, with the guidances of Pittsfield Beautiful, maintained the islands in the parking lots at Burbank Park this pas summer. Tom invites volunteers. Call 448-8328.

Needed: More volunteers

Bob Race, president, has announced that volunteers are needed to fill the positions of Recording Secretary and Fund Raising chairperson. Jerry Krupka has assumed responsibilities for tributary monitoring; and a LOPA website. Call Bob if you can help.

Communications

Dick Laureyns and Ray Dufresne have compiled a "Communication Tree" that will allow LOPA to have messages distributed quickly. Lists will be going out to area representatives for corrections.

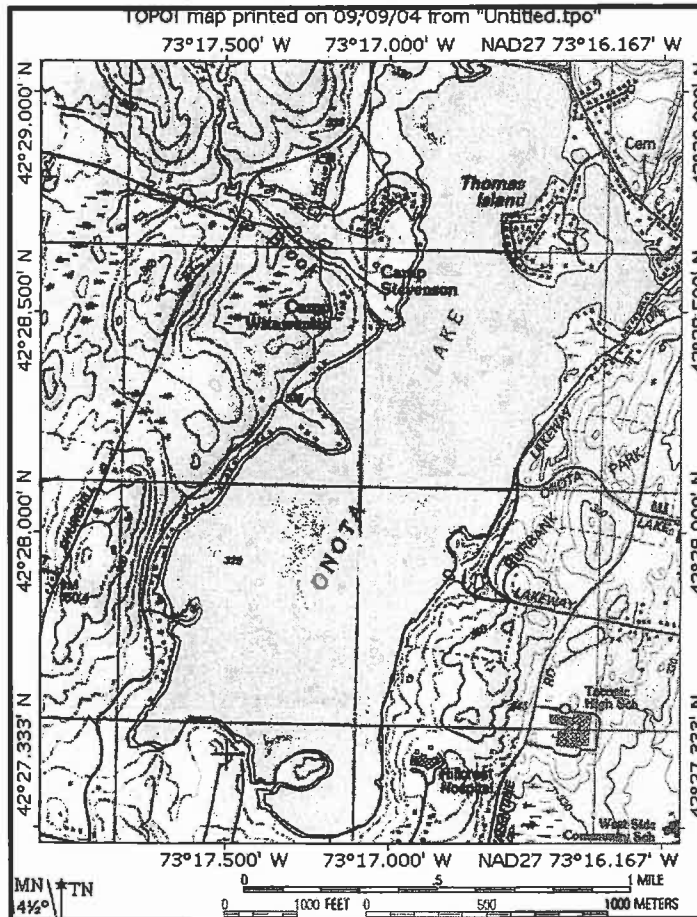
Thomas Island

Andy Kelly remains optimistic that a culvert under the Thomas Island access road can still materialize despite years of delay.

The culvert is seen as a way of directing the water flow from north of the causeway more directly into the lake's outlet. That would eliminate the stagnant water which encourages the growth of milfoil at the shallower north end of the lake.

The estimated cost of the work is \$265,000. Financial considerations and environmental concerns about endangered species have thus far stymied the project.

Kelly says he won't give up.



This is the second issue of *The Guardian*, a periodic publication of the Lake Onota Preservation Association Inc. Editor is Lew Cuyler; assistant editor, Ira Siegal; editorial adviser Bob Race. Cuyler may be reached at (413) 496-9160 or email BerkSculling@aol.com