

Lake Onota Guardian

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

Winter 2007

Inside:

Education.....Pg. 3
Commentary.....Pg. 4
Onota notes.....Pg. 6
Zebra Mussels....Pg. 5
2006 review.....Pg. 6

Four unresolved lake issues loom in 2007

By Lew Cuyler

As the year 2006 winds down, four issues pertaining to the health of Lake Onota began to intertwine with indications that each will come to some kind of resolution in 2007.

Those four issues are:

- Development of west side properties, adjoining the west shore;
- Pittsfield's flexible zoning initiative;
- Pittsfield's master plan;
- And the continuing effort to destroy the weeds that threaten to choke the lake.

West shore property development

In the past year the interest in developing land in Pittsfield has increased thanks to the discovery that the city has some very attractive open tracts of land, particularly on its west side between Lake Onota and the Taconic Mountain range, that the cost of acquiring acreage is much more reasonable than comparable tracts in south county, and that access to Lake Onota is a major asset.

Three of these tracts drew particular notice during the year: the 88 acre Camp Stevenson land just north of Apple Tree Point; the 54-acre Philip Massery land just north and west of the lake that drains into Daniels Brook that then empties into the lake, and the Richard and Debra Kielman farm, a 60 plus acre tract on Churchill Street on the uphill side of Blythewood Drive.

All three of these properties are un-sewered and uphill from the lake. This means that if developed they hold the potential for water run-off to carry fertilizer and septic field leach into the lake, thus encouraging the weed growth that has so severely impacted the lake in recent years.

The Gladys Allen Brigham Center, formerly the Pittsfield Girls Club, owns approximately 88 acres abutting the northwest shore of the lake which for many years has been home for Camp Stevenson. Like so many other non-profit groups, the center has borrowed money for

(Continued on page two)

Siphon pipes installed to help drawdown

A large crane and two trucks, one carrying 12-inch diameter heavy plastic pipes, gathered at the Lake Onota dam Monday morning Dec. 4 to begin the job of siphoning water from the lake at the rate of 10,000 gallons a minute to achieve the drawdown needed to kill the invasive milfoil infestation, a tactic that could be effective if the weather cooperates.

The objective, said Jim McGrath, the Lake Onota harbor master, is to draw the lake down by 5 ½ feet, the amount allowed by permit. Whether that happens will depend upon the weather.

"And that means, no rain, no snow," said McGrath.

The job was performed by Rain for Rent, of North Oxford, MA under a \$24,600 contract with Gardner Construction of Chicopee which sub-contracted the work to Rain for Rent.

A.J. Astrella, Rain for Rent sales representative, said the Onota project is a relatively small one for the company which has a nationwide business involving pumps, tanks, and dewatering and filtration systems.

The project calls for the installation of six 12-inch

(Continued on Page 3)



Worker cuts pipe to fit over Onota dam, in background. (Cuyler photo)

Four issues

(Continued from Page 1)

such major initiatives as refurbishing its headquarters and now has to live with debt service, diverting money that it would rather spend on youth programs. Sale of the property would mean that the debt could be paid.

The center has commissioned a study of the property's potential for development and its board will review findings in mid to late December before making a decision about the tract's future.

The Kielman property has frontage on Churchill Street and dock access to the lake by virtue of a sliver of connecting land on its north side. The Kielmans have not made any formal announcements about the future of their property; however, Richard Kielman is known as a developer of real estate who previously has focused on downtown investment.

An initial attempt to win approval for a 36-unit subdivision of the 54 acre Massery land was rejected Dec. 5 by the Community Development Board, partly on grounds that the project had received a negative recommendation in a peer review by consultants hired by the city to review the project. The report concluded that the subdivision would put an unacceptable strain on the eco-system. Following the vote there were indications the Massery would re-submit the proposal in 2007.

Flexible Zoning

The proposal for flexible zoning is an outgrowth of the controversy earlier this year that developed after the Pittsfield YMCA attempted to sell its Ponteril property overlooking Pontoosuc Lake to a time-share condominium developer. Neighborhood opposition defeated the proposal. The debate made clear the need to overhaul the city's zoning ordinance.

The upshot was the development of a "flexible" zoning plan that will likely be passed in one form or another next year. Its most controversial aspect is that it would allow multi-family dwellings and/or condominiums in residential neighborhoods including those on the shores of Onota.

The overall objective of the plan is to preserve open space by discouraging the "one acre lot" concept that eats up residential land and uses up city services. "Clustering" living units, it is argued, would preserve that open space.

Other objectives are to preserve historical and archeological resources, to promote more sensitive siting of buildings and better overall site planning, to perpetuate the "New England" look in new construction.

As the year ends, the central feature of the proposal is to offer developers "incentives" or "bonuses" to preserve open space. It also seeks to address such issues as affordable housing, handicapped accessible housing (called "adaptive" housing), energy efficient housing, and neighborhood preserva-

tion.

To do so, at least in the December version of the plan, developers would have to set aside 25 percent of their projects for open space. The bonuses would allow more density for living units if they increase the amount of open space, and affordable and adaptive housing.

Critics of the concept maintain it would destroy the existing character of city neighborhoods by allowing multi-family units or condominiums into residential zones. They acknowledge, indeed praise, the goals of preserving open space and being sensitive to the environment, but maintain the proposed bylaw would allow "too much flexibility" for the enforcing agencies. They would prefer more specific provisions.

The proposed by-law has implications for land adjacent to Lake Onota such as development on the west shoreline properties as well as shorefront land owned by Hillcrest Hospital on the southeast end.

A possible change in the proposed new zoning may be to increase setbacks from the shoreline for any new housing as well as to require more screening of new houses so they won't intrude on views from the lake.

Master Plan

The zoning proposal marches forward at the same pace as work on updating the Pittsfield Master Plan which will govern the use of open space and how it might be used for recreation. Whatever de-

velops from the plan will have an impact on Burbank Park, the city's major lakeside holding covering most of the east shore of the lake. The park features a public beach, a boat launch, the Controy Pavilion, picnic tables, and a small boathouse for the non profit Berkshire Rowing and Sculling Society, known as BRASS.

Critics of the park's status quo maintain the lack of security is an invitation to undesirable elements to party, dispose of trash or vandalize the park, and that the boat traffic from the public launch is unsupervised leading to conflicts between boaters and potential accidents because of lack of traffic rules.

As the year ended hearings inviting input from the public were continuing.

Milfoil

For most of the summer the cloying milfoil weed was kept at bay, thanks in part to spot chemical treatment in 2005 and the winter's three-foot drawdown. However, in August the plant revived, infesting several areas of the lake. The usual drawdown was attempted in late fall with the usual problem – the 24-inch pipe in the dam at the northeast end is too small to do the job. In early December the city hired a contractor to install a siphon system to augment the dam drain in drawing the water down.

It is widely believed that a drawdown is the easiest, most effective and cheapest way to discourage milfoil infestation.

However, nature must help. Ideal conditions are no snow or rain during the drawdown followed by a substantial freeze that will kill the exposed plants. Drawdowns become much less effective if rain replaces the water drained, or if snow comes early, thus insulating the exposed plants from freezing.



At right bottom, water flows from existing 24 inch pipe. In center is first of six 12-inch pipes that are now installed.

McGrath: Education key to issues

By Lew Cuyler

Harbormaster Jim McGrath, the city's director of community services whose duties include responsibilities for Lake Onota and Burbank Park, plans to launch an educational program for Burbank Park and lake users next year.

"Yes, we have had problems relating to behavior in the park and on the lake," he said, "but those problems can be addressed. They are not as elusive as overall lake management or weed control."

Specifically, he said, he wants to increase the education of lake and park users next season with materials that point out the various conflicts among users and emphasize the need for them to respect each other's activities.

"For instance," he said, "drivers of jet ski watercraft need to know they should slow down when approaching kayaks, canoes or rowing shells. In the winter snowmobilers need to know that their personal responsibility is to remove their trash. High volume boom-box users should respect that other users are there for quiet times."

He said he hopes to implement the program through the use of brochures, signage, news releases, paid advertisements and possibly a person at the public boat ramp during busy periods handing out literature pertaining to behavior. He said that philosophically he is opposed to charging fees for use of the park as some have suggested as a means of defraying costs for security.

"I just think that public parks should be free to everyone," he said, "but I am willing to explore some options for Burbank Park."

"For instance," he continued, "it might make sense to charge boaters for use of the public access ramp but not charge hikers, picnickers or sunbathers."

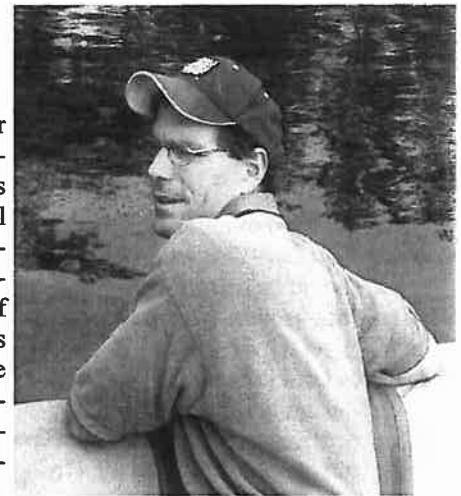
Siphon solution

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pipes that will go over the dam to suck the water out of the lake through natural siphon, just as if water were being siphoned from a high cup into a low cup by means of a flexibile tube.

The 24-inch drain pipe in the dam at the northeast end of the lake is not large enough to achieve a sufficient draw-down. LOPA has worked with McGrath who in turn worked with Mayor James M. Ruberto to develop the siphon solution.

It will be most effective if a hard freeze with no snow cover follows the drawdown. The freeze would kill the milfoil; snow, however, would provide protective insulation for the invasive plant.



Jim McGrath

As the executive for the city's Park Commission which has responsibilities for all city parks and ball-fields, McGrath concedes the difficulty of providing the focus needed for effective on-going lake management that the harbormaster's job entails.

"I think establishing a commission or an authority with responsibilities for the lake, as some have suggested, makes a lot of sense," he said. "Lake management issues deserve much more undivided attention. I could not do this job without the help I get from LOPA, the Lake Onota Preservation Assn."

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

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Rep. Christopher N. Speranzo, 447-7225

Fish & Wildlife Andrew Madden, 447-7225

The Guardian

This is the third issue of *The Guardian*, a periodic publication of the Lake Onota Preservation Association Inc. Editor is Lew Cuyler; editorial advisor, Bob Race, LOPA president. Cuyler may be reached at (413) 496-9160 or e-mail BerkSculling@aol.com

One man's opinion

Time due for Lake Onota Commission

By Lew Cuyler

As the spread of milfoil infestation and the threat of development intensify, it is increasingly clear that Lake Onota which should be a gem in the city's crown of attractions, instead has become an orphan. And because it is an orphan it does not get the attention — and that also means money — it deserves from its parents...the City of Pittsfield.

Responsibility for care and management of the lake lies with Harbormaster Jim McGrath, who is both capable and conscientious. But he is also the city's director of community services and executive for the Park Commission. This means his priorities must lie with the city's ballfields. He simply does not have time to give Lake Onota the attention it needs.

Nor does he have the budget. Last year LOPA recommended the city appropriate \$50,000 for lake upkeep. By the time Mayor James M. Ruberto and the City Council finished the budget process, Lake Onota was left with \$15,000.

The result is that Lake Onota and Burbank Park are not top city government concerns even though together they are among the city's major recreational assets.

Lake Onota is sick and Burbank Park too often is a mess. Yet the lake's illness and the park's deteriorating condition are not attention grabbers and therefore not considered urgent. They only become apparent when a lookdown from a small boat in clear early morning sunlight reveals a robust growth of milfoil and other weeds just below the water's surface...or when upended trash cans and litter thrown from cars the night before greet early morning arrivals at the Burbank boat launch during the summer.

In the meantime even though LOPA has decried the problems at the lake, the city and the rest of us have not developed lasting solutions.

Park security and behavior on the water are huge issues. Park vandalism is an all too frequent occurrence. Boats on the water are accidents waiting to happen because of the ignorance of regulations and the absence of enforcement pertaining to negative behavior.

Finally, the lake is threatened by shorefront land development that will bring in more pollution, more people, and more powerboats, that, if left unchecked, will diminish its potential for recreation.

Because of these threats — thus far, insufficiently addressed, and still somewhat invisible -- I believe that the city's forthcoming land use and recreation plan must have a major focus on Lake Onota and Burbank Park.

To that end, I believe it is essential that the city establish a Lake Onota Commission that would be responsible for management of the lake and park. This idea represents a major recommendation of a study of the lake's problems earlier this

year by a Williams College student project in concert with the Lake Onota Preservation Association. A related idea, perhaps less drastic, is to reorganize responsibilities so that the harbormaster can give much more attention to the lake and have clout to deal with issues.

Two years ago I interviewed Mayor Ruberto about his ideas of solving problems on the lake and in the park. An account of that interview appeared in *The Guardian*.

He said there was not much more that the city could do without developing a revenue stream for both the lake and the park. I agree. Developing such a revenue stream is essential for any effort to rescue the lake.

I believe that modest user fees for the park, a city-owned boathouse, and a city-owned campground for visitors could produce a revenue stream that could go a long way in taking care of Lake Onota and Burbank Park.

I particularly recommend that Pittsfield look at the experience of Hartford, CT and Camden, NJ that have focused on enhancing their waterfronts for recreation. Hartford and Camden are like Pittsfield...both cities went through tough economic times as major employers left, both have developed plans for revitalization, both are making comebacks.

Camden County in New Jersey opened a \$6 million boathouse on the Cooper River last July. The facility serves a wide range of rowing programs and to a lesser extent accommodates kayakers and canoe-ers. Of particular interests, however, is that the major part of its revenue comes, not from water sports, but from offering its facilities for weddings, meetings and other kinds of functions, using the water sports as attractive backdrops. Last month I took a tour of that boathouse. I could not help comparing it to the plain look and Spartan facilities of the Controy Pavilion at Lake Onota and think of what the city could have.

Hartford's boathouse on the Connecticut River opened a few years ago as part of its River Recapture effort. That effort folded into an overall revitalization program to make the city more attractive. That boathouse has become the centerpiece of a river park. The park serves a growing population interested in quiet water and is host to rowing regattas that bring in thousands of people.

It just seems to me that Pittsfield has the opportunity to enhance community recreational programs at Burbank Park and Lake Onota and to develop a revenue stream to support them. The alternative — to continue to allow the park and the lake to deteriorate — is unacceptable. Instead, the city must create an agency or give someone some clout to rescue these magnificent resources.

The Lake Onota problems are well defined but the city and the rest of us have not developed lasting solutions.

Another threat to Onota: Zebra mussels

This article appeared in the Nov. 25 edition of *The Berkshire Eagle*. Reprinted with permission.

By Tony Dobrowolski

PITTSFIELD – They attach themselves to hard surfaces, reproduce like crazy and alter the freshwater environments in which they live.

Zebra mussels, a barnaclelike shellfish, have spread rapidly through lakes and rivers in the eastern United States since they were discovered in the Great Lakes in 1988, and members of the Lake Onota Preservation Association believe it could be only a matter of time until they arrive here.

“That’s the fear,” Robert Race, president of the association, said. “They have to be imported somehow. Attempting to keep them out is pretty tough.”

Those fears were heightened recently when the Onota Boat Livery received a 22-foot pontoon boat from Saratoga, NY, whose hull was covered with zebra mussels. The liver provides winter storage for boats, so there is no chance the vessel will be put into the water. But livery owner Thomas Dailey said the boat’s owner, who had kept the craft in Saratoga Lake, didn’t realize that the vessel’s hull was coated with the mussels until he brought it here.

“There were huge colonies of them,” Dailey said. “You would think people would become aware of this. They’re not keeping up with what’s going on.”

Zebra mussels are native to western Russia, near the Caspian Sea, and have been found in western and central European waterways for nearly 200 years, according to information from studies that have been conducted by the University of Minnesota.

It is believed that zebra mussels found their way to North America in the mid-1980s when one or more transoceanic ships discharged ballast water into lake St. Clair, which connects Lake Erie with Lake Huron. They apparently found the environment to their liking because within one year they had colonized every firm object in Lake Erie. Boaters in lakes St. Clair and Erie have reported engines overheating because their water inlets were clogged with zebra mussels.

They spread through inland waters as larvae transported in water or as adults attached to boat hulls. By 1992, they had made their way into the Mississippi River basin from Lake Michigan via the Chicago Sanitary Shipping Channel. By the end of that year, isolated pockets of zebra mussels were being found from Minneapolis to St. Louis. They have been discovered in lakes and rivers in 21 states, from Vermont west to Oklahoma and as far south as the Gulf Coast.

In this region, zebra mussels have been found in Lake Champlain, in Saratoga Lake, and in the Twin lakes and Candlewood Lake in Connecticut. Dailey said the Twin Lakes are in Canaan, a few miles tough of the Massachusetts border in Sheffield.

Besides clogging pipes zebra mussels also eat the microscopic food supply in lakes and rivers on which fish feed...

“We haven’t found zebra mussels here yet,” said Director of Community Services James McGrath who also serves as Pittsfield’s harbormaster. “I say ‘yet,’ because there is the probability that at some time in the future, we will find them.”

Besides clogging pipes, zebra mussels also eat the microscopic food supply in lakes and rivers on which fish feed. They increase water clarity, but also are believed to be a health hazard because what they filter from the water can increase human and wildlife exposure to such pollutants as PCBs. When zebra mussels coat beaches, their sharp edges can cut swimmers’ feet.

“We have boats coming here from different regions, especially New York state,”

McGrath said. “I think that it’s only a matter of time. We’re trying to be pre-emptive.”

In New York, a law prohibits the “liberation” of zebra mussels into any state body of water.

McGrath met recently with the Lake Onota association to discuss the potential problems surrounding zebra mussels.

He said the city is preparing an education program to warn boat owners of the problems associated with them.

Race said the association has discussed setting up a boat wash to clean the hulls of vessels that come here from other lakes, and trying to conduct boat inspections.

“I think it’s important to do that, but I doubt if it will solve the problem, just because there are so many boats that are coming here,” he said.

“All we can do is make people aware of the problem, so that good people can prevent it from happening,” he added.

Help LOPA to preserve Lake Onota

LOPA needs talent and treasure to help us preserve this gem of all lakes. What can you contribute? Please let us know.

Write LOPA at PO Box 2884, Pittsfield, MA 01202

Or call Bob Race, 413 443-1681

President's letter

2007: A year of positives ...but also some negatives

The year 2006 has been another busy and challenging one for LOPA and its dedicated volunteers who have contributed well over 1,200 hours to the following activities:

— We conducted our sixth annual Burbank Park Clean-up;

— For the fourth year we have cleaned, weeded and maintained the "rosebush" islands in the north parking lot;

— We again put in place and removed the obstruction buoys for the summer season;

— We continued our water quality monitoring at four inlet sites and macrophyte monitoring at 40 stations;

— We revived the tributary monitoring program with monthly documentation of water quality in four inlet streams and the outlet stream:

— We hand-pulled 110 gallons of water chestnut from the inlet pond north of Dan Casey;

— We witnessed a close call when Tom Dailey alertly protected the lake from a boat that he took in for winter storage which was loaded with Zebra Mussels after spending its summer in Saratoga Lake in New York.

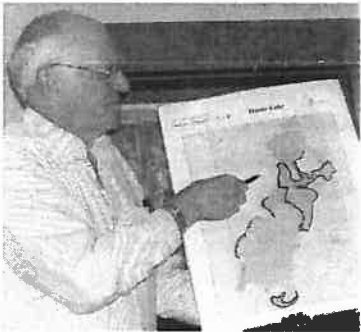
— We supported BRASS with course monitoring boats for its regattas and Learn to Row events;

— We have supported the city in its efforts to foster "smart development" by serving on appropriate committees, attending numerous meetings and hearings, and drafting and encouraging adoption of a Harbormaster's dock policy;

— We continue to work with the city to obtain deep drawdown capability (siphoning this year – hopefully a permanent solution next year via a grant application currently underway) to combat the scourge of Eurasian watermilfoil.

On a somewhat less positive note, we have failed to convince the City that preserving the recreational and aesthetic attributes of the lake is worth the \$50,000 a year that we have repeatedly asked the administration to budget.

We also experienced a major disappointment when we failed to obtain the state grant sought last year for enhanced drawdown capability at the dam. The robust growth of milfoil we all saw in late August leaves us very concerned about next year. We can only hope this year's deep draw-



Bob Race

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down (although later than desired) will help counteract this virulent growth.

As we look forward to 2007, I wish to express great gratitude to the devoted LOPA volunteers who have made possible the accomplishments we have achieved to date, and suggest that it will take continued and expanded efforts of those and several more to attain the goal of preserving this crown jewel of Pittsfield and the Berkshires, Onota Lake. I hope to see many of you at our Jan. 16 open Board of Directors meeting to help plot our course for the future.

Happy Holidays and Best Wishes for a Happy and Prosperous New Year!

Bob Race

