

HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE BASS LAKE REHABILITATION DISTRICT

Wisconsin has a unique set of laws that empower lake shore owners to help protect their own lake. Wisconsin Statutes, chapter 33 provides for the creation of a **Public Inland Lake Protection and Rehabilitation District**. Through public participation and elected representatives such Districts help the persons most affected by a lake's condition and usage to take action to protect and improve the lake environment. The Bass Lake Rehabilitation District was created under this law for just that purpose.

Historical background leading to formation.

For a number of years, there was an informal Bass Lake Association. Cabin and home owners met periodically to try to solve lake issues on an informal basis. Starting in the 1960's the Bass Lake water level slowly began to rise. From 1962 until 1997, the lake rose about 14 feet. Beaches and shore eroded, yards were swamped and lower lying homes and cabins were threatened. Inundated septic systems leached into ground water and wells. The Wisconsin DNR, the County and nearby towns did not offer a solution. The informal association recognized it was powerless.

In the face of enormous damage and property value loss, the lake shore owners petitioned to create a Lake Protection District. After public hearings, the St. Croix County Board approved the petition in 1986. The Bass Lake Rehabilitation District became an official, albeit tiny, instrument for the lakeshore owners to take some action to deal with lake problems.

Purpose and powers of a Lake Protection District.

Chapter 33 and related Wisconsin statutes grant the Bass Lake District certain limited areas of power. They include conducting studies, obtaining grants, and adopting programs and strategic plans dealing with water quality, aquatic plant abatement, nutrient and waste pollution, lake level stabilization, boat and recreational usage, shoreline restoration, and docks and structures near the water. The District can create a Lake Patrol, place aids to navigation and regulatory markers (buoys), and adopt ordinances "in the interest of public health, safety or welfare, including the public's interest in preserving natural resources."

Besides obtaining state grants, the District can adopt an annual budget, levy taxes to cover operations, and issue special assessments for projects qualifying under the law.

Governance and communication.

The Annual Meeting of the District's property owners is at the St. Joseph Town Hall, usually on the first or second Saturday in June. The meeting typically receives reports on lake projects, presentations from the WDNR and the St. Croix County Land and Conservation Department, and discussions from the floor. An annual budget is approved and commissioners elected.

There are five elected commissioners and two commissioners appointed by St. Croix county and the Town of St. Joseph respectively. The commissioners hold public meetings periodically through out the year. In order to vote or to hold office, a person must be an 18 year old citizen and own real property on the lake, as evidenced by the tax rolls. Voting by proxy is not permitted. Property owned by a trust or association can be represented by an authorized voter.

In its twenty year history the District has had four chairmen, Tom Bell, John Eiring, Dick Allyn and our current incumbent, John Coughlin. The activities of the district are communicated by mailing meeting minutes and the bi-annual publication of *The Heron*, edited by Mary Beth Arthaud.

Highlights of District activities and initiatives.

Here are examples of projects and issues undertaken by the District:

1. Lake level stabilization Project

With the lake level at an all-time high in 1996, a large majority of the lake shore owners voted to borrow money from the state to pay for a pump and pipeline to the Willow River. At the time, 14 homes or cabins were in a flooded condition and 12 more were in imminent danger. The pump reduced the lake level to the permitted elevation of 886'. The ten year special assessment to pay off the note was completed this year. Commissioner Bill Lawson, an engineer, has continued to maintain the equipment every year.

Bass Lake is a "hard water seepage" lake with no inlets or outlets. The lake is also fed by rain water underground water that generally flows from northeast to southwest to the St. Croix River. Less rain in recent years have resulted in surface levels at 884' - 885'. As a result, pumping costs have been avoided.

2. Two Ordinances.

After the water level was reduced to 886' the District's Slow No-Wake ordinance was amended to return full speed boating between the hours of 8 AM and 8 PM, seven days a week. The rational is to permit full recreational

boating during most of the daylight hours while, at the same time, permitting a modest quiet time in the evening before sun down. The ordinance was approved by the WDNR.

Since 2000, this ordinance calls for placement of buoys at a limited number of spots where there is danger (a shallow stump off Simon's Point), where speeding would pose a hazard (approaching the boat landing), increase the spread of Eurasian Water Milfoil (the Northwest Bay), or threaten an environmentally sensitive zone (Kelly's swamp). WDNR issue a buoy permit.

There is a second ordinance. It is based on the WDNR Guidelines for Docks and Piers. It's intended to modestly limit the number of docks on a per lot basis and block the development of so-called "dockominiums." The later issue comes up when some one wants to connect up a single lake lot to a multi-lot subdivision off the lake, build a marina and sell access and boat slips to large numbers of non-lake residents.

3. Aquatic plant abatement.

The District has acted as the coordinating body for shore owners to seek permits to apply chemicals to control Eurasian Water Milfoil. The WDNR does not allow private application of Aquacide and other 2-4-D products in the lake. During the years when this noxious weed has been at its worse the District bundled individual applications, submitted them to the WDNR and located a licensed chemical application specialist. The recent decline in milfoil presence has resulted in no such applications for the last two years.

4. Bass Lake Long Range Strategic Plan.

Headed up by Commissioner (and St. Joseph Town Supervisor) Bye Barsness, the District has embarked upon a study of the reasons for declining water quality and proposing measures to reduce pollution and chemical runoff into the lake. There a number of other measures to be considered in order to keep Bass Lake rated as one of the cleanest lakes in western Wisconsin.

5. Shoreline restoration support

6. Advisory building plan review for lake shore zoning

7. Bass Lake water patrol

Started by John Eiring, Jerry Simon and other volunteers, boaters have been provided with reminders of state and local water safety laws and ordinances.

Now coordinated by John Lehto, the patrol is poised to informally assist the on-going efforts to enforce the slow-no wake ordinance.

8. Cattle fence at NW corner of the lake

For a number of years, the District has, paid a modest stipend to the owners of the field at the northwest corner of the lake to fence off the cattle from close proximity to the water.

9. Advocacy with Somerset for parking limitations at the public landing

The District continues to seek ordinance protection from the Town of Somerset from over flow parking on the roads abutting the public landing. It is an issue of the lake getting over crowded on the weekends as well as safety.

In conclusion, the booming population growth of St. Croix County and the eastern Twin Cities is increasing human and environmental pressure on the lake. As the directly elected representatives of the 108 or so lake shore owners, the District can play an important role in protecting the natural resource. This will also serve the ends of property values and lakeside enjoyment.