

Link to lake's past looks toward future

By Steve Engelbert
The Janesville Gazette Staff

Frank Micale, a lifetime lover of Lake Koshkonong, doesn't want the Indianford Dam merely repaired. He wants it repaired and improved.

He certainly doesn't want it removed. Micale is president of the Rock River-Koshkonong Association.

"The association incorporated in 1971 with the purpose of improving the Rock River and Lake Koshkonong for the common good," he said.

And the common good doesn't include pulling out the dam, in Micale's opinion.

The lake represents a substantial asset, Micale said. Its size makes it a great playground for skiers and pleasure boaters. But more peaceful activities are available too, he said.

"The lake is huge, and if you want to find a quiet place to go fish, you can find it and you won't find a water skier," Micale said.

Micale's father, Frank Micale Sr., bought a summer cottage on the lake in 1957. Two years later, he took over a tavern on the north shore called Sunset Lodge. The Micales ran it until about four years ago.

Frank Micale Jr. still owns a three-cabin resort on the north shore. He has lived through floods and times when Koshkonong held too little water for power boats. And he has fought with Rock County over how the dam has contributed to both situations, he said.

The dam, first built in the middle of the last century, doesn't create the lake, Micale said. A constriction above the dam does that. But during dry and normal times, the dam controls the depth of the lake.

Now officials from Rock County, which owns the dam, have publicly speculated about the possibility of removing, rather than repairing it. County officials say taxpayers have grown

tired of the continual cost of repairs to the dam.

Most of Lake Koshkonong is in Jefferson County, and that county has contributed only a pittance to offset costs at Indianford.

Still, Micale, a Jefferson County resident and a bailiff in that county's courts, scoffs at the notion of dam removal.

"That wouldn't be fair, unless the people who own that land were paid for the loss of property value," Micale said.

"Everybody would have to be bought out, and some of the highest losses would be in Rock County."

Those who live on the lake and river already pay high taxes, Micale said.

"And right now, not a single dime of the property taxes of lake dwellers goes to improve Lake Koshkonong," Micale said.

By conservative estimates, people on the lake pay 30 percent higher taxes for similar structures to those inland, Micale said.

"For Rock County to say 'The dam is costing our taxpayer too much money' is ridiculous," Micale said. "Take the dam out and everybody's taxes would rise to offset the lost tax base. The schools aren't going to get by with less money. We're already paying extra taxes."

To form a district, people near the lake will contemplate raising their own taxes even higher. A proposed lake district would tax residents to partly pay for dam repairs and other lake improvement projects.

People on fixed incomes can ill afford another tax, Micale said. But they will be asked to support the lake district.

"I guess we're going to find out how much people on the lake and river want a lake rehabilitation district," said Micale, who is a member of the steering committee for the proposed district.

He figures that the minimum assessment for district purposes will be 50 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. That means the owner of a \$100,000 house will pay at least \$50 more a year.

Those organizing the lake district have made it clear that the new organization won't take ownership of the dam and can't be expected to shoulder the full costs of repairs to it.

"Nobody knows what it will cost to fix the dam," Micale said. "But when it was chartered, fish and boat passage were chartered, too."

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources inspected the dam in July and October of 1997 and issued repair orders to the county in December. The required improvements include a fish ladder but not a lock for boats.

A report from Mead & Hunt, a Madison consulting firm, will present a cost estimate for the repairs. The report should be complete in about a month, said Tom Kautz, county parks director.

Micale has a bone to pick with Kautz, too. The county and its operator, Peter Burno, have not always followed DNR operating orders at the dam, he said.

"Two years ago there were gates closed at Indianford during a flood event in June," Micale said.

Kautz kept insisting the gates were open, he said.

"Our parks director, Joe Nehmer, found that the head gates in the powerhouse were shut," Micale said.

"Tom Kautz' reaction was: 'We're substantially in compliance.' Why is Tom saying that? You don't tell people things are wide open and then we come here and it's not."

"We helped Rock County purchase monitoring stations at Watertown and Milford to prevent this exact thing," Micale said. "They were taking information, but they weren't checking at the dam."

The DNR order says that during floods all gates should be fully open, Micale said. The closed gates meant that 1,000 cubic feet of water per second was not allowed to pass through the dam in the days leading up to the flood, Micale said.

In the course of a week, that meant added misery for people with flooded homes, he said.

Kautz acknowledged that the gates were down but maintains it made no difference.

"The DNR investigated, and they found that when the dam is in submerged condition, it has no effect on flooding," Kautz said. "That's not from me; that's from the DNR."

Nor was that most recent flood the only thing about county operation that has troubled Micale.

In 1979, the lake flooded in spring and then got so low that by July the lake was unusable by boaters, Micale said.

"You know how frustrating that is?" Micale asked. "To have

floods and then no lake?"

The association asked Rock County to request a change in the operating order at the dam, Micale said. The lake interests wanted the dam operator to take water levels in the lake into account. The county refused to ask the DNR for a review.

Then the association went to the Southern District of the DNR and asked for a change. It took an appearance by Micale before the Natural Resources Board to get the DNR to review the operating order.

The DNR agreed to do an ordinary high-water study and revise the 1917 operating order for the Indianford Dam. The order had been for power generation and did not take into account what water level would be maintained in the river and the lake above the dam.

The DNR revised the operating order in 1982, choosing a middle course between the requests of the low-water interests and the high-water interests.

Those who favored lower levels fought the order in court until 1989, when they finally gave in, Micale said. The low-water interests sought to protect marshes and other land from high water and wind.

But floods caused most of the damage to low land, Micale said. And the dam doesn't play a role once a flood has occurred, he said.

"Everyone who has property next to the lake is affected by flood events," Micale said. "Erosion. If you don't have your shoreline ripped, it's going to get washed into the lake."

The key since 1989 is that for the first time the dam operators were forced to take into account the water levels in the lake, Micale said.

Micale and the association don't want high water. They want stable levels to benefit recreation, Micale said.

And for that, the dam is essential.

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