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State officials take boat tour of Lake Koshkonong

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BOAT TOUR — State representatives, natural resource officials and members of the media took a cold and wet ride on Lake Koshkonong Tuesday as the Rock Koshkonong Lake District chairman highlighted plans to explore the possibility of dredging portions of the lake. Pictured above, engineer Rob Montgomery points out a breakwall on the lake to Rick Miller, associate editor of the Milton Courier. — Daily Union photo by James Debilzen.

NEWVILLE - An effort to rehabilitate Lake Koshkonong received the attention of two state representatives and state natural resources officials during a cold, wet and dreary boat tour Tuesday.

State Assembly Speaker Mike Sheridan, D-Janesville, and state Rep. Andy Jorgensen, D-Fort Atkinson, joined area reporters and conservation officials on the rough water for an overview of shoreline wetlands, a breakwall, and a plan to explore the possibility of dredging portions of the lake and creating man-made islands.

"This is a new project to look at a set of things that could be done to improve the lake from essentially an ecological improvement standpoint, a recreation and navigation viewpoint, and there's a general objective of making the lake more attractive as a regional destination," said Rob Montgomery of Montgomery Associates, an engineering firm working with the Rock Koshkonong Lake District.

The lake district has received funding to study the possible dredging of Lake Koshkonong, RKLD chairman Brian Christianson said. The lake district has been working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, primarily in the form of grants, to fund a dredging and island-creation study.

Dredging would increase the depth for portions of the massive shallow lake, which has an average depth of about 5 feet, making navigation easier, Christianson said.

Utilizing the lakebed materials from the dredged areas, man-made islands could be formed to create a barrier that would protect the lake's wetlands.

"We want to continue to explore the ideas of creating these breakwalls to protect some of the wetland shoreline areas," Christianson said. "But also, we're looking at dredging and we know it's not a cheap effort. But if you're going to do it economically, you need to keep the spoils in the lake. So we're looking at some man-made island creations."

The Army Corps' federal grant program, Planning Assistance to the States (PAS), provides assistance to conduct preliminary engineering required to determine the viability of dredging and island formation.

The PAS grant for the study was for \$100,000, but that needed to be matched locally. Jorgensen and Sheridan supported matching the grant, and the matching funds were approved in the state biennium budget.

Jorgensen said that by fronting the matching \$100,000, the state kept the lake district from having to increase taxes to receive the grant.

"This money can be used to study how the Army Corps of Engineers will be able to improve the lake for environmental and ecological reasons," Jorgensen said. "One potential solution includes dredging and creation of the islands. This is very expensive, but it may be a lucrative option for preserving shoreline from erosion."

Christianson said the boat tour was an important step in showing legislators how the lake district wants to improve the overall ecosystem of Lake Koshkonong. He added that it also demonstrates the RKLD is entering into a new phase with the state Department of Natural Resources after a years-long battle over lake level orders.

"The only way we'll be able to attack a project of this significance is if we demonstrate we are all on the same team with the DNR and the Army Corps together with the lake district," Christianson said. "We understand we have our differences over the operating orders on the lake level for Lake Koshkonong,

but it will soon resolve itself in the next 12 months. It's time to move on to tackle bigger issues for the lake."

Christianson said representatives from the lake district will be meeting with DNR Secretary Matt Frank, DNR staff and the Army Corps of Engineers in the next 30 to 60 days to discuss the overall scope of planning and any unresolved issues.

"After that, we will then do a formal roll-out," he said. "We have proposed to do three public meetings, sort of like a town hall, so we can brief the general public together with the DNR and the Army Corps, and show our partnership and what's viable, and what the costs of this project will end up being."

The lake district chairman said the project, if approved, would be expensive and the funds would come from multiple sources.

"If dredging and island creation prove viable, we are talking about more than a few million dollars," he said. "Those dollars can come from a whole host of sources, (including) private foundations that are involved with habitat restoration, as well as the lake district as a local unit of government, much like a city council. We have the ability to bond, so there's the potential we could borrow long term, though that's far down on our list of options at this point."

Although he grew up in Janesville, Sheridan said he has spent much of his life either on the water or the ice of Lake Koshkonong and that protecting the lake should be a priority.

"I think it's almost a necessity," he stated. "We've got to make sure we protect it for that next generation. We want to make sure we do what we can as a legislature to help them in that endeavor."

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