

MILTON COURIER eNEWS

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Dredging study slated for Lake Koshkonong

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LAKE CRUISE – Rock-Koshkonong Lake District Chairman Brian Christianson discusses plans for the lake as Assembly Speaker Mike Sheridan (D-Janesville) looks on. Photo by Rick Miller

Boating conditions on Lake Koshkonong Tuesday morning included chilly temperatures, wind, driving rain, choppy water and fog. Not exactly pleasant cruising. But the weather didn't stop State Representative Andy Jorgensen (D-Fort Atkinson) or Assembly Speaker Mike Sheridan (D-Janesville) from taking a pontoon boat ride on the shallow lake to get a sense of dredging and habitat protection projects being proposed by the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District (RKLD).

"10 to 20 years from now, you're going to see a very different lake out there."
-- RKLD Chairman Brian Christianson

Skipper of the watercraft was RKLD chairman Brian Christianson, who has been busy giving tours of the lake and granting interviews since \$200,000 was secured for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study the possibility of dredging portions of the lake. Spoils, or dredged lake-bottom soil, would be deposited in select locations to form islands that, in turn, could protect wetland marshes and other sensitive areas of shoreline. Recreational boating could also be enhanced over the dredged areas.



Dredging plans — Consulting engineer Robert Montgomery explains how break walls and man-made islands constructed with dredging spoils could protect sensitive wetlands and shoreline of Lake Koshkonong during Tuesday's cruise. Photo by Rick Miller

"What we are trying to do as a lake district is appeal to all user groups." Christianson said in a recent interview, "We're trying to protect the wetland shoreline areas, we're trying to increase the habitat for migratory birds, and we're also trying to make sure we have a little bit more water depth for safety, navigation and recreation."

"10 to 20 years from now, you're going to see a very different lake out there."

The lake district has garnered headlines in recent years for its prolonged court case with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Christianson said the RKLD wants to work cooperatively with lake user groups and "build bridges back to the DNR."

The RKLD was formed in 1999 when it took over operations of the Indianford Dam on the Rock River. The district spans portions of Rock, Dane and Jefferson counties. Its boundary starts at the dam, includes Lake Koshkonong and continues north to the Jefferson city limits.

The RKLD opposes the DNR's winter draw down, or lowering of the lake level to control aquatic plants, and favors overall higher lake levels. The organization maintains that a higher water level would improve both boat recreation and duck habitat.

In 2005 the DNR denied RKLD's petition to raise the lake level and the organization, with support from lakeside businesses and a recreation association, challenged the DNR's authority in court. Another group of Lake Koshkonong property owners, the Lake

Koshkonong Wetlands Association (LKWA) also formed to oppose the RKLD petition, and became a party to the legal proceedings.

In December of 2006 Administrative Law Judge William S. Coleman, Jr. strongly upheld the DNR's authority, and also said DNR evidence proved "that the enhancement to access and navigation from increased water levels would be far outweighed by the substantial negative environmental impacts caused by the higher water" on 3,000 to 4,000 acres of at-risk wetlands.

The RKLD appealed the decision, but in May of 2008 a Rock County Circuit Court judge upheld Coleman's decision. That ruling was appealed as well, and the parties are still awaiting a decision from the Wisconsin Court of Appeals.

Even though the organization's legal challenge is still in play, Christianson has struck a conciliatory tone, saying "it's time to move on."

"The court case is coming to an end." Christianson said Tuesday, "We anticipate that at this time next year, win, lose or draw, the litigation over the water levels on Lake Koshkonong will be completed."

On a radio talk show last week, Christianson said that the RKLD wants to "build bridges back to the DNR. It's been sort of an adversarial relationship with this litigation over the water level. We want to put that issue aside and start looking toward the future."

He also feels that a dredging and island-building project can benefit all lake user groups. Of the \$200,000 in funding for the engineering studies, \$100,000 of the funding comes from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the form of a Planning Assistance to the States (PAS) grant. The RKLD approached the corps about dredging this past spring. The corps provides engineering assistance and determines the viability of various lake projects, including dredging and island building.

But to get the grant another \$100,000 in matching funds was needed. Christianson said that "almost on a whim," he talked to Speaker Sheridan and Jorgensen during the state budget process, and an appropriation for the other \$100,000 was written into the budget, which Governor Doyle subsequently signed.

"We threw the Hail Mary." Christianson said last week, adding that the worst case scenario was that the RKLD would have asked its lake district member taxpayers for money.

"Fortunately, we have some very reasonable, very level-headed people who care about Lake Koshkonong and care about tourism in the area, care about the ecosystem, and had it not been for Jorgensen, Sheridan and Governor Doyle, we wouldn't have seen this appropriation.

"So we've got \$200,000 to go in there and really determine 'Is this viable for Lake Koshkonong?'"

In terms of surface area, Lake Koshkonong is one of the state's largest lakes, covering about 10,400 acres. But engineer and RKLD consultant Robert Montgomery, also on Tuesday's stormy boat ride, noted that the lake is essentially just a wide spot in the Rock River. Notoriously shallow with a flat bottom, depths range from three to six feet over most of the lake, with the deepest "hole" off Thiebeau Point northeast of Charly Bluff reaching eight feet.

The "U.S.S. Christianson" pushed through the haze from Neville and eventually reached a shallow marsh near Carcajou Point on the lake's north side. There, a small break wall has been built to protect the marsh as a pilot project. Montgomery said the secured funding could pay for more such projects, and building islands should be even more effective for maintaining marshes because they will block wind. He noted that similar projects have been done on a larger scale by the corps on Lake Winnebago. With DNR approval, experimental dredging could begin as early as next summer.

Christianson said Tuesday's cruise was the first opportunity for legislators "to see how we're going to spend the money, so they can see that we're not trying to pick and choose among all the different user groups, we're not trying to favor the recreational boater over the fisherman, we're not trying to favor the fisherman over the wetland shore areas."

Sheridan said area lake users should be appreciative for all of the time and effort Christianson has spent in getting the corp's grant and state funding. Jorgensen, whose 37th Assembly District covers nearly all of the lake, echoed those sentiments.

In a July interview with the The Daily Jefferson County Union, Jorgensen said a dredging project on Lake Koshkonong is long overdue.

"Some improvements and preservation procedures have been done in the past, but they have been Band-aids for the larger sediment issue." Jorgensen said, noting that the money would pay for a comprehensive plan that will allow residents to see the larger costs associated with the next step in the process.

Said Jorgensen, "So in many ways, this is the first step in the process of dredging the lake and taking care of the problem the way it should be taken care of, instead of just throwing Band-aids at it. This is doing it right, and doing right the first time."

After bobbing in the water like a cork for a bit off Carcajou Point Tuesday morning, Christianson turned his pontoon boat to the south and headed into the wind toward Newville. Despite the driving spray off the portside, Christianson and passengers were upbeat as they considered future possibilities for Lake Koshkonong.