



Tuesday, January 08, 2013

Koshkonong project to begin this month Low lake level spurs dredging project

By Karyn Spory
Union staff writer

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KOSHKONONG - Lack of rain and drought-like conditions this past year have left area waterways lower than usual, including Lake Koshkonong. However, it still is within the state-mandated limit and, in the end, the lower level might even have its advantages.

Despite having dropped to a record low, Lake Koshkonong continues to run within parameters set by the Department of Natural Resources.

"The DNR is who regulates the water levels on Lake Koshkonong and they do that through studying the operating orders at the Indianford Dam," said Rock-Koshkonong Lake District Chairman Brian Christianson. "What they have is basically two sets of operating orders. The summer operating orders are about a foot-and-a-half higher than the winter operating orders."

The DNR's winter operating orders are in effect Nov. 1-April 30.

"That requires we lower the lake levels by keeping the gates open at Indianford (Dam)," said Christianson. "At no time, so far this winter draw-down period, has the lake dropped below that level that the DNR has established."

The lake's gauge height level was at 5.58 feet, as of Dec. 28, 2012, whereas the level in 2011 was 6.78 feet, according to waterdata.usgs.gov.

The mandated draw-down level is 775.77 feet above sea level maximum and 775 minimum. This year is a rarity because the lake actually will reach that level.

Usually autumn rain or heavy winter snow keep the water level higher.

"Even though we're mandated to get down to a certain level, rarely are we ever able to accomplish that," Christianson said.

The lack of heavy snow and rain last year are why area rivers and lakes are so low. In many instances, lakeshore property owners are seeing rocks, sand and mud in front of their shoreline exposed for the first time.

"They've probably never seen this before because Mother Nature has never cooperated with the DNR operating orders," Christianson said.

The upside of this situation is that the low water level might enable the lake district to perform some exploratory dredging, a project Christianson is excited to get under way.

"We've (the lake district) been working with the DNR and the U.S. Army Corps Engineers on this PAS (Planning Assistance to States) project," said Christianson. "Once we received all of our necessary permits and approvals from both the Army Corps and the DNR, the only way we could make this project affordable is we had to wait for that window of time when Mother Nature would cooperate."

That work must be done when the water level is low enough so the water freezes and stays frozen to allow trucks and scrapers out onto the ice.

"It's actually been sheer coincidence this winter. Because of the drought that we had in the summer, we're going to be able to get out there and actually complete the experimental dredge project," Christianson added.

The project is a compromise reached between the lake district, Army Corps of Engineers and DNR to dredge near shoreline areas to help slow wave erosion.

During the past 10 years, the lake district has sponsored grants to allow homeowners to protect wetland shorelines.

"We spent several years studying the effects of those grants and protecting the wetland shoreline areas, and what we've seen is the wetland native species in the wetland areas have been protected from erosion and has also regenerated native plant growth," said Christianson. "The next step for the lake district is we wanted to go in and do something for the residential shoreline owners."

Christianson said the only way to make the project affordable was to find another use for the material that is being dredged.

An initial idea was to use the dredged material to create floating islands.



Above, Piers provide a visual gauge of Lake Koshkonong's record low level this winter. Below, the area below the State Highway 26 overpass of the Rock River near Blackhawk Island Road is dry.



"We started to explore the idea of the Army Corps of Engineers being experts at building islands; they've done it all throughout the Mississippi (River)," said Christianson.

"We've conducted three public hearings around the lake and a number of different collection of data; the Army Corps sent a boat out onto Lake Koshkonong, where they mapped the lakebed," he said.

However, the DNR thought that instead of building an island, fortifying shorebeds was the way to go. Specifically, this plan would allow the up-earthened materials to help build up the barrier between Lake Koshkonong and Mud Lake.

The trio discovered that Mud Lake is a tremendous fish hatchery, including a great breeding ground for northern walleye.

"We studied aerial photographs and historical photographs and found that the shoreline is rapidly eroding, and if we did not fortify that shoreline within the next 20- to 25 years, Mud Lake would just become a shallow bay of Lake Koshkonong," said Christianson.

The DNR awarded the lake district a \$100,000 grant for the project, which will include fixing the carp gate at the creek that connects Mud Lake and Lake Koshkonong.

As of right now, Christianson estimated the cost of the overall dredging project to be anywhere between \$200,000 to \$400,000.

"It's kind of a grand compromise between the feds, the state and our local unit of government, which is the lake district," said Christianson. "We're all very excited about it. It's not everything that we wanted, but we hope in a couple years, after we study that footprint from where the dredge occurred, we will be able to demonstrate to the DNR and Army Corps that it didn't fill back in, that the dredge area's depth has remained the same."

Christianson added that the logical next step, sometime down the line, would be to revisit the idea of man-made islands from the dredge materials.

"If this experimental project leads us to that point, the lake district feels it's just a win-win-win situation for all of the user groups of Lake Koshkonong, from duck hunters to fishermen because the islands will attract migratory birds to structure in the lake that will encourage and improve the fish habitat," said Christianson.

Christianson said that boating and other water recreation could benefit from the dredging, as well.

A decision on selecting a contractor for the project will be made this Thursday during the lake district's board meeting.

The dredging is expected to begin before the end of January and is hoped to be completed by March 1. It will take place near the boat landing at the end of North Shore Road.

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