



Monday, December 17, 2012

RRKA still very much afloat after 40 years

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KOSHKONONG - The Rock River-Koshkonong Association (RRKA) was created to promote the common good and welfare of anyone who lives near or uses the Rock River or Lake Koshkonong. After 40 years, the organization still is focused on that goal.

"That has been our mission and our mission statement right from the very start: We want to make it safe for the people who use the (waterways)," said Frank Micale, RRKA president.

The RRKA was organized in April 1972 and then incorporated as a nonprofit that September, said Micale, who initially was not a member.

"At first, (members) were area interested persons and businessmen in Edgerton, Fort Atkinson and Milton that got together and put this organization together," he noted.

The group met monthly to talk about possible improvements that, through either legislative means or personal lobbying, might get the waterway more attention.

"That probably was the status quo all the way through the 1970s and early 1980s," said Micale who joined the board in 1979 and was elected president the following year.

Micale still serves as president.

"I was elected in 1980, I think for life," he said. "There's been no one clamoring to jump in and take my position."

Micale moved to the shores of Lake Koshkonong in 1959 and has lived there ever since.

"I love this waterway. I've seen it good and bad. It's a great resource; it's a diamond in the rough," said Micale.

So is Micale, one might say.

"I think it should be noted, as well, that Frank is very modest and humble, but he's lived on this lake since the 1950s," said Stephanie Helle, RRKA board secretary. "For someone like me who's only gotten involved a couple of years ago. Frank is the lake to me. He has such a broad depth of knowledge."

"I've been told I've got Koshkonong in my blood and I think that's right. It's a fantastic waterway. It has economic potential for this area," Micale added.

The organization has done a lot for the area in its 40 years of operation, from placing buoys on the river channel to stocking the waterway with fish. It also has sponsored summertime fireworks displays over Lake Koshkonong for many years.

"We had done some things (by 1980) but, the main thing that happened in that period of time was our group helped a gentleman from the UW-Extension put together a lake rehabilitation law in the State of Wisconsin. We were one of the groups that lobbied that and got that put through the Legislature," he said.

Perhaps one of the most important things the RRKA has done was to help establish the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District.

"The lake district is a form of government; they have taxation powers and those (taxes) go strictly toward the waterway. It's similar to a fire district or sewer district," explained Micale. "They propose projects to their members and then the membership votes to tax themselves to establish those projects."

Micale continued: "We had tried, probably in the early 1980s, to get a lake district formed on Lake Koshkonong. But because our group is voluntary ..., there is nothing there that says you have to participate financially or socially, and with that, we didn't have any success forming that district. So in the meantime, we started improvement-project fundraising on our own."

The impetus for forming the lake district came in 1999 when Rock County was given an ultimatum by the state Department of Natural Resources to either repair the Indianford Dam or tear it down.

"That alone galvanized the lake and river community to form a lake rehabilitation district because Rock County was leaning toward taking the dam out. If that happened, Rock River and Lake Koshkonong as we know it and have known it for 100 years, or close to 100 years, would disappear," said Micale. "In turn, 4,000 properties, or over 55 percent of people who lived on or near the waterway, petitioned Rock County to create this lake rehabilitation district and it happened."

He added that up until that point, the RRKA had been the lead proponent for improving the lake and river.

"The first thing the lake district did was work to acquire the Indianford Dam. The way it turned out, through negotiations with Rock County, is that the lake district ended up becoming the owner of the Indianford Dam," said Micale. "Before (the district) took ownership, Rock County repaired the facility and gave it to them, so we didn't spend any of our district money to repair the dam."

However, saving the Indianford Dam and forming the lake district would not have been possible without the RRKA.

"It was the Rock River-Koshkonong Association that and the Lake Koshkonong Recreation Association that put up the seed money to get the district created," said Micale. "We lent them money to get up and running, which the district paid back to us once it was created. But if it was not for the Rock River-Koshkonong Association and the Lake Koshkonong Recreation Association, the lake district never would have been formed."

"The lake district is doing a wonderful job," he added.

Micale also noted that it is much easier for the lake district to handle projects than it was for the RRKA.

"The lake district is now in the position to take the lead role in lake and river improvements, which is a good thing because they don't have to struggle to spend half their time to raise money to spend the other half of their time making improvements," the RRKA president said. "They just propose the projects at the annual meeting, it is voted on and, ... and it's done. When you've got 4,000 properties, it's easy to raise funds to do things that need to be done."

The RRKA used to host a tag fishing contest to raise monies for lake and river improvement projects.

"The Lake Koshkonong Bounty Hunt was a big success," said Micale. "We had two \$10,000 tagged fish out in the water, plus another five to six fish that local sponsors put a bounty on."

The DNR would place a wire tag on the dorsal fin of a fish to track its migration patterns. If the fish were caught, the angler was asked to return the tag with information about where and when it was caught.

"We took that same process and tagged fish and put bounties on them so if they were caught the day of the event, they got a reward for turning in the fish and the tag," said Micale.

The bounty hunt took place annually from 1986 to 2006.

"I'm proud to say that over that 20-year period, we raised close to \$250,000. It was very good for us," said Micale.

Today, the RRKA is working with the Bark River Fish Hatchery to help ensure the local walleye and northern populations are sustained. Due to budgetary cuts, the hatchery can no longer hire seasonal help to work at the hatchery during the mating season, so Micale and Helle are meeting with DNR and University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Water Council to discuss the possibility of university students completing internships at the hatchery.

Helle said she believes this partnership is the answer because it allows the students to receive the experience they need to graduate and it gives the hatchery the workers it needs to stay afloat.

The organization tries to encourage the next generation of waterway lovers and is looking for new ways to ignite youths' interest with new programs.

The nonprofit also is looking to improve the waterways and make the area a real tourism hotspot.

"We need to do something that's going to be sustainable for our local economy and tourism is number one for this state as far as income. We need to get our piece of that pie," said Micale.

On Wednesday, Dec. 19, the RRKA will host a fundraiser at Culver's Restaurant, 1414 W. Main St. in Whitewater, from 5 to 8 p.m.

Culver's will give "a generous percentage of all purchases" to benefit the RRKA.

RRKA board members will serve food, as well as dish up some holiday cheer.

For more information on the RRKA, visit www.rrka.org.

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