

Nearing a decision?

State DNR may be on verge of Lake Koshkonong water level decision

By Jake Magee

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Photos by Angela Major/amajor@gazettextra.com

Boys play in the water on the shore of Lake Koshkonong on at Lakeview Campground and Bar. Officials have told The Gazette that a decision on the long-standing dispute over the water levels in the lake could be made in the next few months.

INDIANFORD

After years of dispute over Lake Koshkonong's water level, the state Department of Natural Resources could be within a few months of a decision, officials told The Gazette.



Members of a recreational baseball team in Milton push teammate Hayden Sheetz, 11, into Lake Koshkonong on Saturday, July 9, at Lakeview Campground and Bar. Water levels on the lake have been a hotly contested topic for years and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is expected to announce a decision on the issue within a few months.

The Rock-Koshkonong Lake District and area businesses would like to see the water level raised 7.2 inches in the summer for recreational boating and tourism and a resulting economic boost.

The DNR, various wetland associations and hunting clubs want the water level to remain where it's at to protect the environment and wildlife.

The dispute led to a 2013 Wisconsin Supreme Court decision ordering the DNR to consider economic impacts— not just environmental concerns— before deciding Lake Koshkonong's water level.

The department is on the verge of a decision, said Russ Rasmussen, policy advisor to the department's secretary.

The DNR's decision originally was predicted to be unveiled in fall 2015, but finding a solution everyone can live with isn't easy, Rasmussen said.

"They have different perspectives, and we're trying to see if we can't find something that both parties can get on board with, and that does take some time," he said.

Parties on both sides want a decision so they can begin adjusting.

"It's been going on for such a long time that I don't expect them to make one," said Jake Pettit, manager of Lakeview Campground. "I don't know if they ever will make a decision."

Most, if not all, campground owners around the lake would like to see the water raised. Pettit hasn't noticed a decline in business because of lower water, but if the level were raised, it would help the area, he said.

"Most people that you ever talk to want higher water, and the economy around here would be crazy if we had more water. It would be a huge impact," Pettit said.

Wetland and hunting associations would like the department to make a water level decision that doesn't hurt wetlands or the environment, said Charles "Buck" Sweeney, an attorney on behalf of wetland stakeholders.

DANE, JEFFERSON, ROCK COUNTIES

Lake Koshkonong area campgrounds



- 1** Hickory Hills Campground
856 Hillside Road, Edgerton
- 2** Jellystone Park
N551 Wishing Well Lane,
Fort Atkinson
- 3** Blackhawk Camping Resort
3407 E. Blackhawk Drive, Milton
- 4** LakeLand Camping Resort
2803 E. Hwy. 59, Milton
- 5** Lakeview Campground and Bar
1901 E. Hwy. 59, Milton
- 6** Hidden Valley R.V. Resort & Campground
872 Hwy. 59, Milton

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Raising the water could damage wildlife habitat, erode shorelines and destroy farmland and hunting grounds, according to wetland advocates.

No one contacted by The Gazette could elaborate on the talks the DNR, lake district and wetland stakeholders have had or the potential solutions they've come up with. Various groups have to take the ideas to their respective boards for consideration before they can be revealed, Rasmussen and Sweeney said.

Sweeney hinted at a trial run solution.

"They may be getting a compromise that people will try for a period of time," he said.

As for why a decision is taking so long, Rasmussen and Sweeney said the DNR wants to do things right the first time and doesn't want to repeat years of legal battles.

"It's a difficult decision," Sweeney said.