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High water on Rock River could be conscious decision by lake district, resident says

JIM DAYTON
Monday, August 14, 2017

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ANTHONY WAHL

The former powerhouse at the Indianford Dam on Friday, Aug. 12.

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As chairman of the Rock Koshkonong Lake District, Brian Christianson has led the fight to increase water depth in Lake Koshkonong.

One lake district resident, George Wellenkotter, believes Christianson has allowed the Indianford Dam to remain partially



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clogged, keeping the Rock River backed up to preserve a higher water level in the lake.

Wellenkotter, who spent 26 years working at the Janesville wastewater facility, isn't arguing against the lake district's successful fight to raise the lake level by 2.6 inches, **which happened this summer**. Instead, he says the dam's trash racks need to be cleaned so water can continue flowing south, he said.

"If everybody suffers between here and Koshkonong because of no wake and we can't get the water out, what good has that done for all the people in the lake district that are paying dues?" he said. "Granted we'd like to see the lake higher. It's a shallow water lake. If we can get a little more water to them, fine. But we got to get the water out of here for everybody else to be able to use (the river)."

Whether it's a clogged dam, high rain totals or both, much of the Rock River has been under **slow/no wake orders** this summer. That's reduced river traffic and lengthened the time it takes to get from Indianford to the lake by boat, Wellenkotter said.

He and Christianson disagree on whether the Indianford Dam is clogged at all.

At the lake district's annual meeting July 29, district residents **voted overwhelmingly against** a proposal that would have increased property tax rates to replace the dam's wicket gates with slide gates on its western edge.

The wicket gates were once used to generate hydroelectric power. Underwater trash racks in front of these gates are meant to keep debris out, Wellenkotter said.

The Indianford Dam has slide gates on its eastern edge. They slide vertically to manage water flow, and it's easier to tell when they're clogged, Wellenkotter said.

Christianson invited lake district residents to the dam powerhouse

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July 30. He opened the dam powerhouse building that contains the wicket gates and let Wellenkotter try to prove if the area was clogged.

“We feel strongly that unfounded claims of mismanagement must be nipped in the bud,” Christianson wrote in the email invitation obtained by The Gazette. “We will hand Mr. Wellenkotter a rake and ask him to find the blockage he claims exists.”

Even the results of this test are up for debate.

Wellenkotter’s son used a waterproof camera to take photos of underwater debris. The cleaning rake was inadequate, but he managed to retrieve a log and other vegetation, Wellenkotter said.

Christianson emailed a statement to The Gazette but did not respond to multiple phone calls seeking additional comment on Wellenkotter’s claims.

In his email, Christianson said Wellenkotter retrieved one branch July 30. The waterproof camera showed no signs the racks were clogged, Christianson wrote.

Wellenkotter continues to repeat his “unsubstantiated claims” because he believes the dam’s cleaning tools are insufficient and could not show the full extent of blockage, Christianson wrote in the email.

But Wellenkotter isn’t the only person to take issue with the dam rakes.

Kim Bothom operated the Indianford Dam for 12 years before resigning about a year ago. All he had to clean it was a rake and a spear, which he called “primitive as hell.”

Christianson chose not to buy an air compressor that Bothom said would have cleared blockage more efficiently. Bothom decided to resign instead of continue his fight for the air compressor, but the lake district would say it fired him, he said.

“They wouldn’t give me the tools to do the job correctly,” Bothom said. “They thought they were above the law and didn’t have to

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follow mandated rules by the DNR.”

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources requires the trash racks in front of the wicket gates to be cleaned daily, DNR water management engineer Rob Davis wrote in an email to The Gazette.

Bothom said he adhered to this schedule or had a friend fill in if he needed to leave town.

The lake district keeps daily dam gate logs on its website. Dating back to Sept. 10, 2016, the wicket gates are listed as 100 percent open and checked at either 7 a.m. or 7 p.m. by a person with the initials BC.

Christianson is the only person on the lake district board with those initials.

While the wicket gates might be 100 percent open, water will not flow properly if the trash racks are blocked, Bothom said. There is no item that records trash rack cleanliness on the log.

Philip Monk lives next to the powerhouse. He has occasionally heard its steel doors slam shut to indicate somebody is checking the wicket gates, but otherwise he rarely sees anyone there for maintenance, he said.

Others have made similar observations. Janice Castle owns The Edgewater Inn on the river's eastern shore and does not see regular cleaning inspections, she said.

“Every day they're supposed to be out there cleaning,” she said. “There's a guy getting paid to do it, but you never see him out there cleaning it up.”

As reported by The Gazette on Saturday, the river has been under slow/no wake orders for most of the summer. Wellenkotter estimates it would take 90 minutes one way to reach Indianford from the lake, and few people want to take such a slow trip for a meal or drink, he said.

Castle said business has slowed this year without normal riverfront

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customers. Next door, Showboat Burgers and Beer was experiencing the same issue.

Showboat bartender Sue Mahlum said the bar has a slower pace without boaters. A clogged dam could be somewhat responsible for high water levels, but she placed more blame on high rainfall.

Closer to Lake Koshkonong in Newville, The Anchor owner John Kinnett said he has lost traffic from riverfront homeowners who would travel up the river and dock at the restaurant. Some of them don't even have their boats in the water, he said.

Most of The Anchor's customers arrive by car, so losing boaters won't kill the business. But the drop-off has been noticeable, he said.

Kinnett had no issue with how the lake district has managed the water levels this summer.

"Brian (Christianson) doesn't determine when slow/no wake occurs," Kinnett said. "I think they've been doing their job. That's what they're there for. People are always going to complain about something."

Like The Anchor, nearby Rock River Marina has also had fewer customers. But slow business due to high water isn't because of any one decision by the lake district, manager Josh Babcock said.

Wellenkotter believes replacing wicket gates at Indianford Dam with slide gates will alleviate the problem and rejuvenate riverfront businesses.

The DNR has a grant program for dam projects. If the lake district received the grant, the DNR would cover half the cost of the first \$400,000 of the project and then 25 percent of the next \$800,000, Davis wrote in an email.

In Christianson's email to The Gazette, he included a link to a presentation given by UW-Madison hydrologist Rob Montgomery at the district's annual meeting. Montgomery's presentation showed dam modifications would not have a significant impact on

high water levels.

Wellenkotter disagreed with Montgomery's assessment. If the trash racks are plugged, then water can't flow freely and will cause higher water levels upstream, he said.

And Wellenkotter can't think of another reason for Christianson to not clean the trash racks other than favoring lake recreation over the river.

"These residents and these businesses deserve as much business as anybody else, and they should be able to use this river as much as anybody else," Wellenkotter said. "Everybody pays lake dues. We should all be able to benefit from it, not just on the lake."

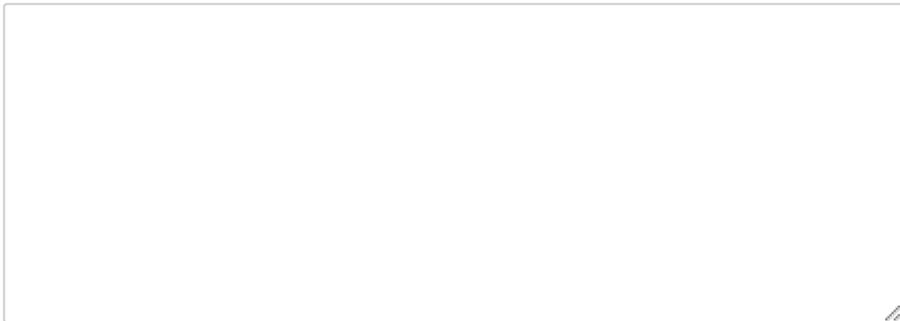


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I visited the Lake District's website and found 2 things; 1. Mr. Christianson lives on the river. Why would he or the board intentionally restrict the river to Slow/No Wake from Memorial Day to past July 4th weekend? The RKLD has always advocated for more boating/recreational opportunities, not less. 2. The reporter references Rob Montgomery (a UW-Madison expert in hydrology) and I found Montgomery's analysis on the RKLD website. The reporter does not interview experts? The reporter makes no real effort to go beyond baseless accusations.

By Long_Time_Gone at 12:26 pm Monday, August 14, 2017 | [Report Abuse](#)

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