

## Austin Lake project making progress

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By Kalamazoo Gazette staff



**Spring sailing:** This ice-boat sailor took advantage recently of the last of the ice surface at Austin Lake. The latest lake improvement project for Austin Lake is set for a public hearing sometime this spring.

By Tom Haroldson

Special to Portage Gazette

PORTAGE -- The latest proposal to improve Austin Lake is moving toward a public hearing, but whether it will be approved, what it will cost each property owner and ultimately if it will work are questions without immediate answers.

The most recent proposal on the table of the Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board, the five-person panel appointed to govern a lake-improvement project, is an estimated \$500,000 aeration and bioaugmentation program for the southwest bay of the lake, considered the area with the highest sediment levels.

The two-part program involves pumping air into the water from 27 ceramic diffusers and applying bacteria and enzyme treatment. The project is proposed for five years, beginning this year through 2015.

The recommendation comes from Lakeshore Environmental, of Grand Haven, which was hired by the lake board last October for an \$11,654 contract. The board has secured a \$30,000 loan from Kalamazoo County for the lake study and other costs.

The board also has agreed to find an attorney to prepare documents needed for the public hearing or hearings. Under the normal special assessment process there could be a public hearing on the necessity of the project and one on the special assessment district. The lake board suggested it might want to combine the two into one hearing to speed up the process.

The board also narrowly agreed to apply for a permit with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to do the project, which will cost \$500. Applying for the permit before the project is approved also speeds up the process and allows the lake board to begin the aeration this year if it is ultimately OK'd. If not, the board is out the \$500.

The bottom line, said Ed Sackley, an Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board member and Portage mayor pro tem, is that if the people don't want the project it will not be done.

"We're not saying we're committed to doing this, " Sackley said before the board's 3-2 vote to submit a DEQ application soon. "If people don't want to do the project, we're not going to do the project. But if we don't do the permit now we will have to wait, and some people will be upset that we have wasted another year. Already some people are upset we have wasted a year to get this far."

The Austin Lake's Governmental Lake Board, appointed by the Portage City Council, are Sackley; Don Mordas, an Austin Lake resident; Elizabeth Campbell, a Portage city councilwoman; John Zull, a Kalamazoo County commissioner; and Kalamazoo County Drain Commissioner Patricia Crowley.

Both the project and the lake board have the support of the Austin Lake Riparians, a lake residents' association that made the initial proposal for the southwest bay project in 2008. The aeration project at that time had the backing of the majority of South Bay residents, with 55 percent in support, 19 percent who declined to sign the petition and 26 percent who could not be reached.

The petition was presented to the council in early 2009, withdrawn for technical reasons but in August 2009 the Portage City Council reactivated the Austin Lake Governmental Board and the Riparian Board then resubmitted the aeration proposal that was eventually referred by the council to the lake board in September 2009.

Jennifer Jermalowicz-Jones, of Lakeshore Environmental, outlined her company's study at the recent Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board meeting. The report can be found, along with other background information on the history of lake improvement efforts and technical data, at [austinlakeportage.com](http://austinlakeportage.com).

She said that while there is no guarantee how much sediment could be reduced each year, a similar project on Indian Lake in Van Buren County showed at least a 1 foot reduction in some areas.

"I'm not saying how much we will lose, but I hope it is higher than Indian Lake, " she said, adding that Austin Lake appears to be gaining at least 1 to 2 inches a year of sediment for the lake that is already quite shallow with an average depth of 4 feet and the deepest spot at 14 feet.

Dredging, she said, is not the answer. It would cost at least \$28 million to dredge the southwest bay to a 5-foot depth. That's far more than the \$500,000 aeration and bioaugmentation proposal.

As part of the management plan, the company also suggests lake property owners take steps to avoid putting future nutrients in the water that lead to plant and weed growth. Those recommendations include not fertilizing lawns, watering with lake water, growing cattails and other native plants that

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help catch nutrients and pollutants and don't burn leaves near the water because the ash is a high source of phosphorus.

The latest proposal is at least the third since 1979 when dredging was first proposed but shot down because of the high costs. A trial aeration project in 1993 also was done on a limited basis, along with a study in 1996.

Each cleanup proposal, though, has come down to funding. Several lake residents have complained throughout the years that they cannot afford to pay thousands of dollars for an improvement project, and there has been some disagreement about who should be assessed: just the area of the cleanup or all lake residents.

The lake board said there are 433 total parcels on or around Austin, 132 of them on what is known as South Bay.

Even if nothing is done, lake residents will be assessed for costs so far, including the \$30,000 line-of-credit loan.

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