

## Public hearing on Austin Lake project May 18

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PORTAGE -- The question of whether the latest Austin Lake improvement project is practical and will work -- not how much it will cost -- will be the only consideration at a public hearing in May.

The Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board, the five-person board appointed to govern a lake improvement project if one is done, has set a 6 p.m. May 18 public hearing at Portage City Hall.

The public hearing is the first of two for residents to weigh in on the estimated \$500,000 aeration and bioaugmentation program for the southwest bay of the lake, considered the area with the highest sediment levels.

The "practicability hearing," or a hearing to study the feasibility, likely will hear comments about assessments, but the lake board will only consider at the hearing if the project has merit, members said.

"This public hearing is not how we would assess people," said lake board Chairman Ed Sackley, who is also mayor pro tem of the Portage City Council. "We have to work to come up with an assessment scheme. The practicality hearing might provide information that is valuable for an assessment that will be presented at the second public hearing."

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On the table is a proposed two-part program that 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, hired by the lake board last October for an \$11,654 contract. A representative of the company will be at the hearing to present the proposal and answer questions.

The board has secured a \$30,000 loan from Kalamazoo County for the lake study and other costs. Even if the project does not go through, the costs will have to be repaid through assessments.

The board also has agreed to find an attorney to help prepare documents needed for the public hearing or hearings. Sackley said at the recent meeting that attorneys have been interviewed, but none has been retained.

The board also has 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, it is out the \$500. As of the recent lake board meeting, no permit had been filed.

Board members said they are aware that some lake residents are concerned about costs and how an assessment district might be set up for the project.

"We understand there are people who don't want anything to do with it, who don't want to pay an assessment, " Sackley said. "At the same time, we are committed to a process that is open and transparent. No one can accuse us of pushing it through. Not everybody will want this to happen, but everyone will have an opportunity to say something."

Patricia Crowley, Kalamazoo County drain commissioner and a member of the Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board, agreed.

"We are here at the will of the people, " said Crowley, referring to the reconvening of the lake board at the request in 2008 of the Austin Lake Riparians.

The Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board, appointed by the Portage City Council, consists of Sackley and Crowley; Don Mordas, an Austin Lake resident; Elizabeth Campbell, a Portage city councilwoman; and John Zull, a Kalamazoo County commissioner.

While no firm assessment district has been set up, Sackley outlined some of the options that could be available for funding such a project if it is ultimately approved. An assessment district could include all 433 lake properties, just the 133 southwest bay properties or some combination.

If all 433 properties were assessed, it would cost the average property owner about \$1,200 total, or about \$250 a year. If only the south bay residents are assessed the total cost would be more than \$3,400, or about \$700 a year.

Another possibility is that some would pay a flat fee and then the south bay residents would be assessed the rest.

The problem with all of those scenarios, said lake resident Lynn Elliott, is that the lake board does not even know if the majority of lake residents wants the project. There have been several past attempts at lake improvements that have failed because of costs and uncertainty of success. Many residents don't see the benefits to them of a project in the south bay. Others are struggling in tough economic times and simply can't afford any extra cost.

"It may be that most of the people on the lake don't want to do this, " Elliott told the board. "It may not be an important enough project in my mind to do."

Zull said that's what the lake board needs to find out.

"That's why we're having this hearing, " Zull said.

The Austin Lake Riparians, which made the initial proposal for the southwest bay project in 2008, said it has not voted yet on whether to back the most recent plan, primarily because of the uncertainty about costs.

"We have discussed it but did not say if it was feasible, " said Riparians President Kirk Wolf. "Not everyone has read it. We don't know if we are for it because we don't know what it will cost."

Jennifer Jermalowicz-Jones, of Lakeshore Environmental, outlined her company's study at the Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board meeting in March. 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 Cass County showed at least 1 foot reduction in some areas in one year.

Dredging, both she and the board agree, is not the answer. It would cost at least \$28 million to dredge the southwest bay to a 5-foot depth.

The latest proposal is at least the third since 1979 when an aeration project was first pitched but shot down because of the costs. Additional studies were done in 1985 and 1990 that concentrated on dredging. A trial aeration project in 1993 also was done on a limited basis. In 2001, the Austin Lake Riparians asked the Portage City Council to halt a proposed dredging project after a survey showed 54 percent opposed. That request was granted.

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