

Point Beach residents speak out about lakes

By Andrea Agardy

POINT PLEASANT BEACH

—After weeks of hearing residents voice their confusion, complaints and concerns about the lakes here, the borough council decided to schedule a public information session for the sole purpose of gathering opinions of what course of action the borough should take to improve the Lake of the Lilies and Little Silver Lake.

On Monday evening, a group of about 45 residents joined Mayor Thomas Vogel, Councilmen Michael DiCicco, Jeff Dyer and a pair of engineers from Schoor DePalma in borough hall to make their voices heard.

Before Borough Engineer Ray Savacool presented the results of the study of the lakes he had completed, Mayor Vogel took a moment to remind residents that borough officials are well aware of the fact that the borough's lakes need more than just cosmetic improvements.

"We're here regarding the health and well-being of Little Silver Lake and Lake of the Lilies," Mayor Vogel said, adding several residents have expressed concern about the vegetation growing around the Lake of the Lilies at recent council meetings.

"We're here to address the whole issue," the mayor continued. "The council realizes the lakes need an overall improvement... We know we need to dredge the lakes, but that won't be possible in the short term with these two lakes."

However, Mayor Vogel said the governing body is slowly moving ahead with the "long, arduous process" of dredging Lake Louise. In addition to the high cost of a dredging project, Mayor Vogel said the process is complicated by the question of where to deposit the dredge spoils once the material has been removed from the lake bed. That question has been answered for the Lake Louise project only. The mayor said the borough will be permitted to deposit the material pulled from the lake on Gull Island.

Mr. Savacool began his remarks by noting residents have recently

come forward with a number of lake-related concerns, including the health and environmental hazards caused by the geese that gather at the lakes, shoreline stabilization, aesthetic improvements and whether or not the phragmites — the reeds that grow around the lakes — should be cut down or left alone.

Mr. Savacool said Little Silver Lake is the central lake in the borough, which drains into Lake Louise. About one-third of the shoreline around the lake is privately owned, he said, adding the public areas of the lake are home to a variety of recreation activities.

There is a large, established population of phragmites on the eastern and northern sections of the lake, he said, adding residents in the area have been involved in "an ongoing battle with geese" in the area.

Mr. Savacool said his "first blush" recommendations for the area surrounding Little Silver Lake include controlling or possibly eliminating the phragmites, stabilizing the bank near the bandshell and maintaining the borough's infrastructure near the lake and the surrounding streets.

In his study of Lake of the Lilies, Mr. Savacool said he found bank erosion along Newark, Chicago and St. Louis avenues, as well as a thriving population of phragmites along Baltimore Avenue, "to the point where it's hard to see the lake because of the regrowth."

While Little Silver Lake is home to active recreation thanks to the bandshell, the veterans' memorial and the adjacent parking lot, Mr. Savacool said Lake of the Lilies is a more "parklike" setting.

His recommendations for Lake of the Lilies included shore stabilization and beautification and potentially eliminating some of the phragmites.

However, Mr. Savacool cautioned residents that the reeds do deter the geese from settling along the lakeshore, and added that eliminating only some of the phragmites could solve the problem only temporarily. By leaving some of the plants along the lakeshore, he said the seeds could spread and the reeds

could regrow in the areas that had been cleared. He also said the eradication is a multi-step process, including spraying herbicide to kill the live plants, removing the biomass and replanting, and added there is not currently a plan in place about what species of plants to use to replace the phragmites.

In response to a question from resident Marla Williams, environmental engineer Ryan Merritt said the herbicide used to kill phragmites is nontoxic.

"Shooting from the hip," Forman Avenue resident Ken Andrews, said removing the reeds around the northwest section of Little Silver Lake, "will give us a great view of the colors and types of cars" driving by.

The phragmite issue is further complicated by the fact that some of the reeds are growing on private property. Mr. Savacool said if the council decides to move ahead with a plan to eliminate the phragmites, the council would seek permission from private property owners before doing any work on their land.

The question of what the borough can do to address the phragmites growing on private property was a concern held by several residents, including Mary Buletza.

Ms. Buletza said she had received a letter informing her not to cut back the vegetation, but the letter made no mention of private or public property. Now, she said the engineers are recommending eliminating the phragmites, but the borough would not do any work on private property without the owners' consent.

She asked who would be responsible for paying for removing the phragmites from private property if the owner agrees to allow borough employees or a contractor hired by the borough to do the work.

"That would be a discussion for the governing body," Mayor Vogel replied, adding the council would likely be willing to share the cost with property owners or cover the entire expense if it was "reasonable."

Forman Avenue resident Steve Coker noted the phragmites provide nesting and feeding grounds for swans and egrets and asked if the engineers had given any consideration to keeping a natural element in their improvement plan.

"That's a valid point," Mr. Savacool said, adding he does not see the proposal to improve the lakes as a way to create another tourist attraction, but rather, as a way to improve areas where people already go. The "more out of the way" sections of the shorelines could be preserved for wildlife, he said.

"Perhaps the east shore of Little Silver Lake isn't an area where you want people," he said. "Maybe [that] can be enhanced as a natural area."

Resident Ann Lightburn asked the engineers if they had studied invasive plant species other than phragmites, to which Mr. Savacool said he had not. She said Japanese knotweed also grows along the lake and advocated "a comprehensive plan to address all species in the lake."

A major concern voiced by many residents at Monday night's forum was the runoff that drains into the lakes.

"Both lakes act as catch basins for the drainage from the majority of the town," Mayor Vogel said, adding the drainage issues will need to be addressed by state and county agencies, since the lakes are surrounded, in part, by state and county roads.

Some residents, like Dean Wenz, of St. Louis Ave., said there were worried about the effect the silt washed into the lakes by runoff is having on the depth and health of the lakes.

"The lake [of the Lilies] was 16 deep," Mr. Wenz said. "Now is 2 or 3 feet... You're worried about beautifying a dead lake."

"Let's fill it in and make it a parking lot," he added sarcastically. Mr. Savacool said the silt finding its way into the borough's lakes is a result of the development of the area. Although the state has adopted stricter stormwater management

rules, he said what has already been built is the source of the problem. The intention is not to direct silt into the lakes, Mr. Savacool said, although that is ultimately the end result.

"Sixteen feet of the lake is gone, maybe we can make a stand and tell them to fix the lake," Mr. Wenz said. "Why are you talking about plants when the lake is dying?" Resident Tom Spader said it is encouraging to hear borough officials talk about beautification and added he realizes the borough does not have the money to launch additional dredging projects now.

"But I think I would feel better if I heard what the borough thinks should be done at the state and county level to address the root of the problem."

Mayor Vogel said borough officials have been discussing the issue with the state Department of Environmental Protection for years and said, "it's frustrating for the council too."

"Route 35 is a state highway," the mayor said, "and we firmly believe the state owes it to us to cost-share. That's a pitch we're certainly making."

Some residents, including Mr. Anderson, encouraged borough officials to take a more aggressive approach with the state and county when it comes to the sediment washing into the lake.

"I think of this as a triage situation," Mr. Anderson said. "What you seem to be doing is rushing in people who need Band Aids and leaving people who have their intestines laying on their chests to the side until all the Band Aids are given out."

"If the sediment is the result of the county or the state's actions, maybe you need to table some of this money [for improvements] and suck it up and file an action to have them fix what they may have broken," Mr. Anderson added. "One way to get attention is, if you have a big stick, use it."

Mayor Vogel cautioned that going after the state is "a double edged sword."

"To dredge, you need a permit

from the state," he said.

"Now the town and property owners have to pay to fix the problems caused by the county and the state," Ms. Buletza asked. "It sounds totally ridiculous and [it's] a fiscal abomination. What are we here talking about the tip of the ice-berg for when the whole iceberg is killing us."

As the meeting drew to a close, St. Louis Avenue resident Rosa Crawley said she and her neighbors have been coming to the council for months with their concerns about the lakes, and thanked the borough officials for launching the study.

"We can't minimize what you guys have done," Ms. Crawley said. "What you guys is amazing, to address it and put a proposal together."

On Tuesday, Mayor Vogel said he was pleased with the turnout the information session generated.

"An engineering study is a snapshot at that point in time," the mayor said. "The residents brought a beneficial perspective [to the issue]."

"The idea was to be as inclusive as possible," the mayor continued. "The residents have different ideas from the council members about the pros and cons of removing the plants from certain areas... It's important to get feedback and comments from all stakeholders."

Now that Mr. Savacool and Mr. Merritt have heard how residents feel about the issue, Mayor Vogel said the engineers will draft a final report and set of recommendations for the council, which he said the governing body hopes to receive by March 31.

However, he said the final report will not mean the discussion is over.

"Anyone with recommendations for improvements either lake is encouraged to comment