



Assessments on hold for Austin Lake project in Portage; resident survey planned

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By **Tom Haroldson | Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette**

PORTAGE — Failure to approve assessments for a proposed **Austin Lake improvement project** does not mean the work won't happen this year, but it does reduce the amount of time to meet requirements.

Ed Sackley, chairman of the Austin Lake Governmental Lake Board, said adjournment of a Jan. 18 hearing on the proposed assessments means the lake board is facing a tighter timeline for publication of legal notices and establishing the assessment roll with the Portage treasurer's office. The legal notices and assessment roll must be finalized by March 31 for the taxes to be levied starting in July.



Austin Lake

Gazette file

The hearing, which drew more than 70 people and lasted more than three hours, was adjourned until 6 p.m. Feb. 22 at City Hall to allow two board members to survey lake-area residents.

"What is now created by adjourning until Feb. 22 is a real time squeeze," Sackley said during the lake board's meeting Tuesday. "Everything has to be done no later than March 31. We've put ourselves in a real bind here."

The lake board is proposing assessments that call for the owners of 305 properties outside the south bay to pay \$80 per year for five years, or \$400, while owners of 131 properties in the south bay would pay \$574 per year, or \$2,870 for five years. The board has approved a five-year, \$528,534 budget for the aeration and bioaugmentation project that is designed to reduce the lake's muck-sediment levels. The project was approved by the lake board last summer.

Residents divided

During the Jan. 18 hearing before the lake board, most property owners who spoke opposed their assessments, saying it would be a hardship or arguing all property owners should pay the same assessment. Lake board members said they expected opposition because the hearing was designed to allow residents to contest their assessments, not support them.

"It's not going to impact me seven times as much as people on the other part of the lake," said Todd Lyons, one of several property owners at the hearing who complained about south bay residents paying a higher assessment. "We should all share equally with that."

Gene Zang, a retiree living in the south bay area, said, "This assessment will create a real hardship for many of us on a fixed income. I see, personally, no other alternative but to cut back on my medication. It's sad that something with a low priority will trump my personal needs. This project offers no guarantee and it offers very little in return. Our tax dollars should not be gambled away."

A few people said they supported the project and assessment.

"I'm supportive of the project and I think it will benefit everyone on the lake," said Bill Main, who would pay the higher assessment. "I'm OK with the assessment I receive. I hope we get this project to the finish line."

The two-phase Austin Lake program would pump air into the water from several diffusers on the lake bottom and then apply a bacteria and enzyme treatment. The air lines also are embedded on the lake bottom to prevent being snagged by lake users.

The five-year project could end sooner if the work does not produce the desired muck-reducing results. A similar project on Indian Lake in Cass County has seen a nearly 2-foot reduction of muck, according to Lakeshore Environmental, which performed the work.

Lake board members John Zull and Elizabeth Campbell suggested the assessment hearing be adjourned because they felt a survey of residents was needed. They also objected to the fact the project's feasibility must be approved before residents learn what they will pay in assessments. That's the process as spelled out in the Michigan Inland Lakes Act.

"The law sets up arbitrary timelines and steps of the process that make the hearings a farce," Zull said.

Zull said he supports the project and, along with lake board member Patricia Crowley, who supported adjourning the assessment hearing, believes the board still can meet the project deadlines.

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