

The Times

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Private lake could go public — for a price

Facing \$2M dam repair, Honey Lake residents offer to open water access in trade for Hopewell funds

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Lisa Coryell

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP -- As the clock ticks on the state's orders to shore up the dam that forms Honey Lake -- or see the lake drained -- residents in the upscale Elm Ridge Park neighborhood are asking the township to open the lake to the public so the repair project can be eligible for public funds.

Residents who live on the waterfront, reacting to recent news that it will cost upwards of \$2 million to fix the dam, say they would give up exclusive rights to the lake in exchange for public funds.

"There is at least one house, maybe more, for sale on the lake," said resident Stuart Dember. "If the township would buy one of these houses, you would get public access to the lake and you could find your public sponsor."

The residents, who had considered taking on the repair costs themselves, have been waiting for estimates since March. At a meeting this week, they learned the cost would be more than \$2 million to \$4 million.

"None of the lakefront owners have the money to sponsor it," said one resident who didn't want to give her name.

Township administrator Paul Pogorzelski said it was the first time residents had expressed an interest in opening the lake to the public.

But he told them it wasn't as simple as providing the public with a way to get to the lake. The owners of 27 lakefront homes each have "riparian rights" of ownership that extend to the middle of the lake, he said. All the owners would have to give up those rights for the lake to be of public use, he said.

"If all the property owners on the lake say they'll allow public access to the lake, that might change the discussion," he said. "Certainly that decision needs to be made."

Resident Bill Gear said lakefront property owners aren't territorial over the portion of the lake they own.

"I see people out there in canoes all the time," he said. "I don't go out and chase them away from my piece of the lake. I suspect most homeowners would be prepared to cede rights to operate on the lake surface because they already do that regularly.

Mayor Michael Markulec said the future of Honey Lake hinges on a collaborative effort among all levels of government and the residents living around it.

"It's now a matter of sitting down to determine who's willing to step up and take which piece of this project because I don't think anybody wants to see this lake go away," Markulec said.

Honey Lake dam, built in 1964, is one of six small dams on Stony Brook constructed in the 1950s and '60s to halt the flow of silt into Carnegie Lake in Princeton. While the dam is in no imminent danger of collapsing, it recently was designated a "high hazard dam" by the state Department of Environmental Protection due to construction of homes in its downstream flood plain in the decades since it was built.

The new designation was triggered by major flooding in Burlington County in 2004, when several dams failed and caused extensive property damage. Since

then, the DEP has tightened its dam safety regulations.

To protect the lives and property of those living downstream of Honey Lake dam, the face of the earthen barrier needs to be bolstered with concrete, block or stone so it won't wash away in the event of a major storm, DEP officials have said.

The federal government will pay 65 percent of the cost -- but only if a local public sponsor, such as the state, the county or the township, pays the remaining portion. Without public access, no such sponsor is likely to step forward.

An original sponsor of the dam was the Mercer County Soil Conservation District, but that sponsorship is set to expire in 2013, leaving the dam orphaned.

If the dam isn't shored up soon, the state has threatened to decommission it and drain the lake, leaving the once beautiful lake a running brook amid marshland.

One resident at the meeting this week asked Pogorzelski why Princeton University hasn't been approached about paying for the dam work since it was the school that built the dam to benefit Carnegie Lake years ago. Pogorzelski said he will have township attorneys look into crafting a letter to the university.

