



# Lake Views

*The newsletter of the Yahara Lakes Association*

Winter • 2003

## County Executive Wants to Phase Out Phosphorus

*Following is an article written by Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk which promotes the passing of a new county wide ordinance to phase out the use of phosphorus in lawn fertilizers. The Dane County Lakes and Watershed Commission is currently in the process of soliciting data from a variety of experts on the subject. The YLA will reserve judgement on the endorsement of this proposal until more information is gathered and continue to keep our members informed.*

**By Kathleen Falk  
Dane County Executive**

We can have green lawns without causing green lakes! That is why I recently called for a new county ordinance to phase out phosphorus in lawn fertilizers.

Phosphorus is a nutrient that feeds the growth of algae and, when excessive, causes algae to bloom to nuisance proportions, making our lakes green, clogged and often undesirable for swimming, boating, fishing, or those walks along the shore.

Most soils in Dane County have adequate levels of phosphorus, and phosphorus-free fertilizer is already available at local retail establishments.

Our lakes are priceless! Imagine the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center overlooking a parking lot, the Green Lantern Restaurant without Lake Waubesa, or the Memorial Union Terrace looking out over, well, anything but Lake Mendota.

Our lakes, rivers and marsh areas are also home to so much incredible wildlife. But this precious gift is losing its luster.

Throughout the year, the water from rain and melting snow that runs off our farm lands, lawns and city streets is the single biggest pollutant of our lakes, ponds and streams. Its sources are everywhere, and stopping it requires everyone.

That is why, since my first land use plan, "Design

Dane" in 1998, we have targeted our efforts to stop the run-off of phosphorus and other pollutants from our lawns, agricultural fields, streets, parking lots, and driveways.

We started with the Lake Mendota Priority Watershed Project, where we spend a great deal of time working with farmers and landowners on improvements to stream banks and animal lots.

Last year, we became the first county in the state to implement a county-wide ordinance that requires new developments that have large areas of hard surfaces, such as parking lots, roofs and roadways, to install landscaping and drainage systems that catch the runoff and allow it to seep into the soil, rather than running into the lakes. This ordinance covers all cities, including the City of Madison, towns and villages in Dane County.

This past July, I signed a resolution restricting the use of phosphorus-containing fertilizer on our own county properties as a step in further reducing phosphorus pollution. This summer I asked the Dane County Lakes and Watershed Commission to develop, introduce and work with the County Board to pass a county-wide ordinance that would phase out phosphorus-containing lawn fertilizers. Of course, we would provide exemptions where appropriate, such as when a soil test shows that phosphorus is necessary.

Communities in the Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota metro area already ban phosphorus-containing lawn fertilizers, and a statewide limitation on phosphorus in fertilizers goes into effect in Minnesota in January 2004. Even the small community of Amery, Wisconsin, restricts phosphorus fertilizers.

In the meantime, I am asking our citizens to help keep our lakes enjoyable by buying no or low-phosphate fertilizers, applying fertilizers carefully and when rain is not expected, sweeping up any unused portions, and avoiding piling leaves or grass clippings in the street as decomposition releases nutrients.

Each person doing a little will make a big difference in keeping our precious lakes healthy-and blue.

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## Board of Directors Election

Included in this newsletter you will find a Board of Directors ballot. Please take a moment to vote for four (4) candidates and return your ballot to the YLA office. Two incumbents have agreed to serve another term on the Board: Bill Fitzpatrick and Aicardo Roa-Espinosa. Both Bill and Aicardo are past presidents and have devoted a number of years of service to the Board. Thank you Bill and Aicardo for agreeing to continue your service.

Longtime member Russ Mittelstadt will be stepping down from the Board. Russ served as treasurer for the association for many years and frequently offered a historical prospective for many of the Board's discussions. Please join us in thanking Russ for his many years of service.

Steve Morton will also be stepping down from the Board but has agreed to continue to serve the Board as the association's Technical Advisor. Steve will continue to offer scientific expertise to the Board and will continue to write his informative articles for the newsletter. Thank you, Steve, for all your years of service and especially for agreeing to continue to assist the Board.

We are pleased and fortunate that Mike Gerner and Doug Bach have agreed to seek a spot on our Board of Directors.

## Phosphorus Fertilizer Ban

There is no argument regarding the desirability of reducing the input of plant nutrients to the lakes. However, there are some major disagreements regarding the claims being made for the resulting improvements in water quality, such as the frequency of algal blooms.

Bodies of water take on the characteristics of the surroundings. Lakes in naturally fertile areas such as Dane County are going to be fertile while lakes in non-fertile areas such as the mountains will be non-fertile. The latter are often referred to as being clean. It is not realistic to think that the Madison lakes can be crystal clear while the surrounding lawns, fields, forests and gardens are rich and green. It was not that way before Madison became populated and it is unlikely to change. This is unlike a swimming pool in which the water is closely controlled and chemically and physically isolated from the environment.

Furthermore there is much scientific data to indicate that the lake sediments are the major source of phosphorus to and from the water while urban runoff is relatively small. Therefore even if the nutrient runoff is reduced it could take a very long time before the sediment nutrients are leached downstream and the water quality improves.

I think it is clear that while every effort be made to reduce nutrient input to the lakes as it is obviously the right thing to do, it is also clear that no claims or promises be made regarding the extent and time scale of water quality improvement.

# REPORT FROM LAKES & WATERSHED COMMISSION

By Mark Pernitz, YLA Representative

**County Budget.** There were very few decision items this year since all departments were directed to reduce their budgets significantly. At the recommendation of LWC, in 1998 a boat replacement program was established for the sheriff's lake patrol. One of the sheriff's five patrol boats is replaced each year with the result that no boat is more than 5 years old. Expensive repair and maintenance bills, which plagued the department in the past, have now been avoided.

The DNR reimburses 75% of the cost of the boats over a 5-year period. This results in a cost to Dane County of only 25% of the purchase price. In addition, if the boat that is being replaced can be sold in year 6 for 25% (or more) of its purchase price (a conservative assumption) this results in a final cost to the County of \$0.00 for each patrol boat!

For the replacement schedule to work, it must be followed each year. The 2003 budget included funds to replace boat #1. However, the County Executive froze these funds and a new boat has not been purchased this year. Boat #2 is scheduled for replacement this year. LWC has recommended replacing boats #1 and #2 in the 2004 Capital Budget so that the boat replacement schedule can remain intact. The County Executive rejected this recommendation and did not include any funds for replacing either patrol boat.

There is currently an effort at the County Board to amend the budget to include funding for the two patrol boats scheduled to be replaced in 2003 and 2004. Hopefully this effort will be successful by the time you read this newsletter.

**Weed Cutting.** LWC and the County Executive have recommended moving the weed harvesting operation from Public Works to the Parks Department. The Parks Department appears to be better suited to handle the seasonal staffing needs. It is hoped that this will be a positive step in improving the County's weed harvesting program.

LWC has also proposed an ad hoc committee consisting of representatives from LWC, Public Works, Parks, DNR and the University to review the current weed cutting program and to recommend improvements. It is expected that this committee will begin meeting as soon as the County budget is finalized.

**Pier Numbering.** We are pleased to report that 524 lakeshore owners purchased signs to display their pier numbers. This is an excellent result and we appreciate your support. Signs will again be available for purchase next spring.

Unfortunately, there has been some misleading information regarding the placement of pier signs. Some home owners have mounted their pier sign on their boat houses or elsewhere along their shoreline, apparently so they would be displayed year round and would be available for ice fishermen, snowmobilers, etc. However, response time from rescue units can be dramatically improved if signs are placed in a consistent location at the end of one's pier. Thank you for your cooperation in this important public safety effort.

**Phosphorus Fertilizer Ban.** As you no doubt have read, the County Executive and other public officials have proposed a ban on the sale and use of lawn fertilizers containing phosphorus. The theory behind this proposal is that most lawns already have sufficient phosphorus and don't need more. In addition, it is believed that excess lawn phosphorus finds its way into our lakes and promotes algae growth.

LWC has been asked to develop a proposed ordinance. We are currently soliciting information from the scientific community on whether such an ordinance will be beneficial in promoting water quality for our lakes. For example, is the phosphorus that is getting into our lakes coming from lawns, or is it primarily from agriculture runoff? Once this data is collected, a public hearing will be held prior to the introduction of any proposed ordinance.

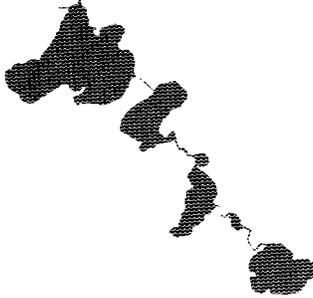
Although the data is not yet complete, it appears that the best case is that a phosphorus fertilizer ban will be another step in improving the water quality of our lakes. It certainly will not be the solution to our water quality challenges. Rather, like the erosion control and storm water management ordinances, it would be another step in the process of protecting and revitalizing our precious water resources. Citizens should not be misled into thinking that any such ordinance will result in a dramatic, overnight improvement in our lakes' water quality.



## NEWSLETTER

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**Yahara Lakes Association, Ltd. is a non-profit organization of over 700 members dedicated to protecting and representing lake property owners and improving the environment of Lakes Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, Kegonsa and the Yahara watershed.**

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*Call 848-1450 if you would like to become involved in any of the above-listed committees, or if you have concerns you would like a committee to address.*