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South Bend Tribune

September 18, 2005

The disappearing lake

Pump-and-fill project nearly done at Barron Lake

By LOU MUMFORD
Tribune Staff Writer

NILES -- Is there magic in the air -- OK, the water -- at Barron Lake, east of Niles?

Maybe so. At least some lakefront property owners might think that's the case after watching the lake slowly disappear the last several years.

The lake is now about three feet lower than most property owners seem to prefer. Since July alone, it has dropped more than a foot, making the rain that fell Thursday night and Friday welcome but hardly enough to make a significant impact.

With some lakefront residences hundreds of feet removed from the water, the Barron Lake Association launched an effort several years ago to establish a legal lake level through an artificial "pump and fill" system. Delayed by litigation, the project, tested two months ago, will feature a pump that reaches deep into the aquifer.

Cass County Drain Commissioner Jeffrey VanBelle said he was pleased the 72-hour test had no impact on area wells.

Since then, a permanent, submersible pump has been ordered and an existing drain under Michigan 60 has been enlarged. By the end of October or, at the latest, mid-November, it's expected pumping will begin to raise the lake to 756.5 feet above



Nellie, a dog whose owner lives on Breezy Beach Drive on Barron Lake near Niles, walks along the shoreline Friday. With water levels at a low level, the pier at left is completely out of the water.

Tribune Photo/SHAYNA BRESLIN



sea level.

As of last week, the lake measured 753.4 feet above sea level, according to Bruno Eidietis, an association member who has long supported the pump-and-fill project.

Although the project missed the 2005 boating season, it should be operational in plenty of time for next year. Eidietis said plans call for running the pump throughout the winter.

VanBelle said he's been generally pleased by the progress of the project. Still, it was clear last week at a lake association meeting that members are growing impatient, he said.

"They're like, can you turn that pump on tomorrow?" he said.

Emery Hirschler, a retired Tribune executive and the president of the Barron Lake Association, said he was encouraged after VanBelle indicated he might start the pump even before a pipe is hooked up connecting the lake to the drain that runs under the highway.

There's certainly no immediate danger of the lake overflowing, Hirschler said.

"We're down three feet now," he said. "With 24 hours, seven days a week of pumping, with no evaporation, it would take three months to bring it up to (the legal) level."

Eidietis said he's all for an immediate start of the pump, pointing out the lake may never rise high enough to require drainage. The water level, he said, will be kept at 6 inches below the 357-foot legal level to provide a cushion in the event of rain or snowfall.

"The drain in reality is nothing more than an insurance policy," he said.

VanBelle acknowledged that costs have increased beyond his initial \$300,000 estimate. But he said the increase isn't substantial, and lakefront property owners won't be assessed more than \$500 a year on their property tax bills.

If costs should rise above the total \$1,500 per property-owner figure, VanBelle said he'll add a fourth year to the assessment period rather than increase the amount of the annual payment.

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