

July 8, 2013

**COLLECTION OF EDITORIALS WHICH HAVE
RECENTLY APPEARED IN
THE REPUBLICAN NEWSPAPER
ON DEEP CREEK LAKE.**

Permission to reprint provided The Republican Newspaper,
Produced by Friends of Deep Creek Lake,
© Friends of Deep Creek Lake 2012, 2013. All Rights Reserved

***Editorial #1, 2013
Paramount to Our Future...July 4, 2013***

Over the years this newspaper has carried photographs of hundreds of proclamation signings, symbolic ceremonies designed to either extend congratulations or to raise awareness of everything from heart disease to Flag Day to any number of special events. The general, overall effectiveness of proclamation signings is likely minimal; however, we single out one signing this week because of the immense importance that lies behind it.

July has been proclaimed National Lakes Appreciation Month by a national organization and the governor of Maryland, and this week the Garrett County commissioners issued a local version. (See photo in this section.) While the proclamation is designed to cover all lakes – and Garrett County has about a dozen lakes – the focus of this corner today is on the mother of them all, Deep Creek Lake.

The importance of DCL to Garrett County cannot be overstated, even though it has been touted on numerous occasions and by many different entities. One figure that is reported on a fairly regular basis is the percentage of Garrett County's budget

that is funded by property taxes of lake and lake watershed owners. That number is a staggering 60%, which alone is sufficient to emphasize the importance of Deep Creek Lake.

However, when one takes into account the many other economic benefits of the lake, and the proverbial domino effect, it takes on an even greater significance. One can only try to imagine Garrett County without DCL, and how much worse off our general economy would be in that scenario. Because, besides the many millions of dollars in tax revenue that would be lost, millions more would be lost in revenue generated by the restaurants, motels, marinas, recreational facilities, and gas stations that are only in existence because of the presence of DCL. The hundreds of jobs, both seasonal and fulltime, for local young people and the not so young, would not exist were it not for the lake. The accommodations tax revenue into the county coffers would be maybe 10% of what it is today. Tourism into our county would be slashed to shreds, meaning every other business that is *not* located around the lake would suffer. We likely lose our "destination point" designation. This very newspaper in which these words appear would likely be unable to survive financially were it not for DCL.

So the preservation of Deep Creek Lake is paramount for the future of Garrett County, plain and simple, whether one lives in Shallmar, Oakland, Finzel, or Crellin. Therefore, the various issues involving the lake must be taken seriously and addressed over the next several years to keep the lake the gem that it is today. These would include problems of water levels, shoreline erosion, flow of silt into the lake, invasive plant life, lake access issues, possible overuse of the lake surface, and others. The lake is not crippled by any of these problems today, but all of these conditions need to be addressed relatively soon in a comprehensive, coordinated, team effort by the state of Maryland (owner of the lake), county government, lake property owners, lake business owners, and, well, all of us who live in this county. The lake is just way too important to our future.

Note: the following 4 Editorials appeared after the Editor, Don Sincell, went for a boat tour of the lake hosted by Friends of Deep Creek Lake.

Editorial # 1, 2013

First in a Series...August 30, 2012

Probably the single most significant "event" in the history of Garrett County – that which would have the greatest impact on the future of the county – occurred roughly 90 years ago, with the damming of Deep Creek and the filling of Deep Creek Lake. This body of water, created primarily for the production of electricity, would become the county's proverbial cash cow, its golden goose, as it came to be the focal point of county "industry" and quickly made Garrett County a destination point for tourists and second-home owners.

There was, however, at least one huge oversight back when the lake was constructed: County officials should have started some kind of fund – supported by tax money, user fees, etc. – specifically earmarked for the long-term conservation of Deep Creek Lake.

Because that did not happen, because the state of Maryland – the relatively new owner of the lake – is financially broke, because of virtually no management/conservation practices in much of the land around the lake (the lake watershed) over the years, and because of various natural aging processes going on in and around the lake, we have what is rapidly becoming a serious problem. We now have a sick lake, and it appears that no one – not the state of Maryland and not the county – is doing anything to treat it.

Probably the two most significant problems right now are the filling of lake coves with sediment and the rapidly growing invasion of at least two forms of plant life that are so prolific that swimming and boating are becoming almost impossible in many acres of water. One need only take a one-hour tour by boat to see the effects. The addition of the droppings of the now-year-round presence of Canada geese makes it downright disgusting.

This is not information that the thousands of us local folks whose jobs and businesses are directly or indirectly dependent upon the tourism dollar (including this newspaper) want to hear. They definitely do not want potential out-of-area customers to hear about it either. But it is a reality, and one that must be addressed soon or everything is just going to get worse. We're talking about falling property values at the lake. We're talking about the possibility of people looking for a second home deciding to go somewhere other than Garrett County/Deep Creek Lake. We're talking about the possibility of people already living at the lake leaving the area. We're talking about people planning to rent a property at the lake for a week going somewhere else.

The seriousness of this cannot be overstated. Well over half of Garrett County's tax money comes from Deep Creek Lake property owners. Most of the jobs in this county depend upon tourism, and a large percentage of tourists comes here because of Deep Creek Lake.

The issues are complicated, multi-faceted, and well beyond the scope of one editorial for sufficient elaboration. Thus this is the first in a series that will go into more detail and, it is hoped, suggest some potential avenues for the restoration of what is without question Garrett County's most valuable resource.

Editorial #2 2012

Commissioners Must Step Up...September 6, 2012

In the early stages of research on issues involving Deep Creek Lake, one thing is already becoming crystal clear – It is going to take a cohesive, cooperative effort by many parties in order to adequately address the problems at the lake, particularly those having to do with lake water levels, the slow-but-sure filling of coves with sediment, and the invasion of certain plant species. The players in this include, first and foremost, state and county government, along with the DCL Property Owners Association (POA), the Friends of Deep Creek Lake, the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce, and various business owners, both on the lake and affected by the lake (e.g., whitewater rafting companies in Friendsville). Because there are so many players and aspects to the situation, certainly more than one or two columns will be required to cover them, and time and effort will be needed to compile the information before certain opinions can take shape.

However, there is no question that the county commissioners are going to have to step up to the plate in many ways. After all, as noted last week, a huge portion – by far the largest portion – of the county budget is supported by the real estate taxes paid by lake property owners. Thus, inaction – or wrong action – by the commissioners in matters involving the lake is clearly akin to "biting the hand that feeds you."

To date, there is little evidence that the current commissioners, and many before them, have stepped up concerning the lake, and in fact, just this week the commissioners took a step backward.

After making the shortsighted (okay, wrong) decision recently to amend the lake watershed zoning ordinance to allow a specific lake-front business owner to rent jet skis without offering any other services associated with a marina, the commissioners this week turned down a request by the POA to take six months to re-examine, and possibly delete or modify, the amendment; and to impose a moratorium on issuing any additional permits for uses based on the amendment until the six-month study is completed.

In response, commission chairman Jim Raley said that an evaluation of potential impacts of the amendment is already under way by the DNR's lake management office, and that the POA would receive a copy of that report. Further, the suggestion for a six-month moratorium on issuing additional permits was summarily rejected.

This is not the kind of cooperation that is going to be needed as efforts go forward to address problems at the lake, and there are a number of other ways in which county elected officials must get involved that will be delineated later.

As a footnote, it was suggested by more than one that describing DCL as a "sick lake" in last week's editorial was "inaccurate" or "too strong." In a spirit of cooperation, the writer retracts that description and suggests that a better one might be that there are areas of the lake that are "unhealthy" and need treated ASAP.

Stay tuned.

Editorial #3 2012

The DCL Property Owner...September 20, 2012

In resuming the focus of this column on critical issues involving Deep Creek Lake this week, it seems important to describe how these issues affect lake property owners, particularly to Garrett County citizens who do not own property there.

There are a number of misconceptions and blanket judgments by some non-lake property owners about those who are fortunate to have either their primary or a secondary home along the lake. Yes, there are some enormous, magnificent houses on the lake, most of which have been constructed in the past few decades, and most by people with deep pockets who have no problem affording them.

However, a large percentage of lake-front resident properties have small to medium-size houses that are no different than those in non-lake residential areas throughout the county. Many of them are owned by folks who have been Garrett Countians all their lives, families who were lucky to have purchased lots or homes there many years ago at bargain prices. They may be living a relatively comfortable life, but they are far from what one should consider to be wealthy.

However, as with most other tourist-destination properties on lakes and beaches around the country, owning such properties is expensive. Because the assessed value of resort properties is

high, the owners' property taxes are much higher than those of non-resort property owners. The owner of a much grander house in, say, Oakland or Mountain Lake Park will generally pay far less in property taxes than the owner of a rustic cabin at the lake. As has been noted several times before, the property taxes paid by lake property owners total over \$25 million annually, which covers more than *one-third* of the county's budget.

There are various other expenses for lake property owners, such as dock fees, and in certain lake communities that have privately owned roads, extra money must be allocated to cover such things as snow plowing, road and culvert maintenance, etc.

With this in mind, we turn to some of the specific problems being faced by some lake property owners, namely the proliferation of invasive plantlife, the continuing erosion of shoreline, and the filling of coves with sediment, three problems about which the property owners can do little. They have no real effective – or legal – means of personally attacking the vegetation that surrounds their docks and makes both swimming and boating in several areas both dangerous and almost impossible. The same goes for the infiltration of sediment into the lake, which is also negatively affecting recreational use of the water in several coves. There are things they can do to help protect their piece of shoreline from erosion, but they are expensive. Not only must they purchase all of the materials necessary, but they must also pay hundreds of dollars to the Department of Natural Resources to be "permitted" to so tamper with the *state*-owned buffer strip.

Why should all residents of Garrett County worry about these problems being faced by lake property owners? We need only refer back to the fourth paragraph in this column, which notes the financial significance of Deep Creek Lake to the county budget. The fact is, property values at the lake are beginning to fall because of some of the current problems there, and a number of property owners have already successfully challenged their assessments, having their property values reduced. That dollar figure to date, according to the county commissioners, is around \$400,000 in lost property value, and that number is growing. This means declining tax dollars to support the county budget.

Our publication is receiving criticism from some who do not want negative information about Deep Creek Lake to receive coverage, as it could possibly cause persons looking for places to recreate or purchase a vacation home to look somewhere other than Deep Creek Lake. That concern is understandable, and great care is being taken to not assume an alarmist position or to make the problems appear larger than they are. Deep Creek Lake is still a wonderful place to enjoy, where plenty of opportunity for boating, swimming, water sports, and fishing remains intact.

It just seems, though, that instead of trying to be deceptive, a far more prudent approach is to

first honestly acknowledge that these problems do exist and are growing, and then more importantly, take proactive, coordinated, cooperative action as soon as possible to address them.

Next week's editorial will focus on the role of the state of Maryland as owner of the lake and the buffer strip.

Editorial #4 2012

Some Optimism For DCL...September 27, 2012

A telephone conversation with Maryland Department of Natural Resources secretary John Griffin yesterday yielded some optimism in addressing issues that are negatively affecting Deep Creek Lake, but also reinforced the fact that there are no easy answers, particularly to the problem of sedimentation that is filling in many of the lake coves.

It seems clear that Secretary Griffin is not only well aware of the issues, but is also genuinely concerned about addressing them and understands how crucial the lake is to the well-being of our county. Unlike some lake property owners, he does not believe that the lake is currently in *serious* trouble, but he agrees that there are "signs of stress" that warrant action as soon as possible. Like most others, he believes that the proliferation of invasive plant life and the continued filling of the coves with sediment are the most threatening problems. He said that the water quality of the lake, which has been continuously monitored since 2008, remains generally good, and that fishery health is sound. While many lake property owners include shoreline erosion as one of the most significant problems, Griffin said that the DNR's "technical people" do not believe that it is among the most serious issues.

Thanks primarily to the Garrett County commissioners and the Deep Creek Lake Property Owners Association (who provided most of the money), testing for both invasive vegetation proliferation and sediment have been under way since this past spring. The vegetation surveying was just recently completed, and Secretary Griffin is scheduled to come to Garrett County to give a "state of the lake" presentation on November 14. He indicated that an action plan to address this particular problem would be part of that presentation. Therein lies some optimism.

The sediment study – which will help determine such things as how much sediment is flowing into the lake from streams and runoff, and how much of it is a result of shoreline erosion – will not be complete until later, with results anticipated by next spring. However, no matter what this testing reveals, the secretary acknowledged that fixing the problem of sediment buildup in some of the lake's coves will be a monumental, perhaps impossible, task. Dredging, which would cost

tens of millions of dollars, is all but out of the question, at least from a state-funding standpoint. Griffin spoke of the current poor economy and lack of available state funds, but added that even if the state had money for this purpose, it would never be allocated for the benefit of just a handful of residents. He said that when dredging projects in the Chesapeake Bay are approved, for example, it is only for those channels that are crucial to heavy commercial boat traffic, and not primarily for the benefit of private residents. He said that, conceivably, through low-interest loans and/or special tax districts, the cove property owners themselves might be able to finance such a project. Little optimism here.

The secretary did point out that because of weather conditions this summer – unusually high temperatures and drought – the lake's problems have been exacerbated, and added that there are numerous, similar bodies of water throughout the country that are experiencing some of the same problems, particularly low-water levels and more fertile conditions for unwanted plantlife.

When asked about the expense that must be borne by property owners who want to try to limit shore erosion of their own lake fronts (over \$1,500 just for the permits, plus all materials used for the project), Griffin said that he would like to see some simplification of the permitting process. Even though the buffer strip (lake-front footage) is owned by the state, he did not mention anything about trying to revise the fee structure or the possibility of the DNR contributing to such projects. No optimism there.

More than once during the conversation, the secretary emphasized that there needs to be a cohesive, cooperative approach by the state and county government to "better position ourselves" to address the lake's problems. He spoke of a "new governance structure," with the state and county developing a plan not only for the lake, but also for the lake watershed, from which come sediment and potential pollution. He acknowledged that the current board of county commissioners have been responsive and are showing a willingness for such collaboration, obviously recognizing how important the lake is to the economy of the county. In this lies the most optimism.

The secretary was told that the majority of county residents also realize the importance of the lake, but that the opinion of some is that the state has always been very good at *studying* problems (ad nauseum), but not always very good about *acting* to solve them. So we can only hope that with much of the studying either complete or nearly complete, some real action for our lake is forthcoming anon.