

LAKE RONKONKOMA ADVISORY BOARD Meeting

Wednesday, January 13, 2016

Meeting Minutes

The Pledge of Allegiance is recited.

The speaker, Chart Guthrie of the New York State DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation) is introduced. Mr. Guthrie is present to describe the proposal for the Islip docking area of the Lake.

Al Hornberger, of Story Brook Homes, who is seeking to have an apartment complex located in the Lake Ronkonkoma watershed was contacted with a request to appear but is not present at this meeting.

Fred Gorman, a member of the Advisory Board suggested that those present are advised to attend the Smithtown Town Planning Board meeting related to the apartment complex with the date of the meeting set for February 17, 2016 at 7:30PM.

Mr. Guthrie begins his presentation describing the possible modernization of the DEC fishing access site. He notes that there is a question mark at the end of that statement as no plans are finalized. "Nothing is set in stone and everything is conceptual." He is presenting this to the advisory board to get feedback from the community and people around the lake.

Mr. Guthrie presents an image of the current parking area at the existing DEC fishing access site. The asphalt parking area has spaces for nine cars and trailers and five cars. The parking area is sloped away from the lake, so the asphalt does not drain directly into the lake.

The site has a concrete launch ramp, which, as necessitated by its purpose, is sloped towards the lake. Property owned by the DEC is bounded by a wooden fence on its right side. This fence just about marks the boundary between the DEC land and the county land. The DEC has used almost all of the land it owns and does not have a way to reconfigure that land while remaining in their owned parcel.

Mr. Guthrie approached Nick Gibbons of Suffolk County Parks because he knew that the land south of the DEC fishing access site, which is bordered in red on a map he is presenting, is county land. He was particularly interested in the area between Victory Drive and the DEC fishing access site and the DEC fishing access site and the biofiltration basin.

Mr. Gibbons confirmed that this land was county land. The county purchased it a long time ago with money not earmarked for anything. Due to the purchase not being earmarked for any specific purpose this allows the parcel to be used for any purpose, instead of a situation where it is earmarked for groundwater protection. The County parcel measures just less than ten and a half acres. This parcel includes an extension of Victory Road, however that portion of the road is presently undeveloped.

Mr. Guthrie believes this is an opportunity to do something really nice with this area. The County has not used the area in any form leading to some question of ownership of property including signs that warn anyone to not trespass. In addition, due to it being not developed the land has not been properly maintained allowing for the growth of Japanese Knotweed, locusts, Bittersweet growing on trees, Norway Maple, Rugosa Rose, along with a feral cat colony.

Mr. Guthrie then presents images of the shoreline of the property. Located there is concrete rubble and a box that is supposedly the drain from what Mr. Guthrie has always called a biofiltration basin. The constructed basin on the shore was inhabited by ducks when Mr. Guthrie

last observed it. The location is a wetland, and a functioning wetland to some degree, so it presents some value.

Mr. Guthrie started with the DEC in 1981. Back then, the property was already overgrown and people were referring to it as “the failed biofiltration basin”. No one has done anything with it since. It is currently fenced from the roadway but it is not fenced from the lakeshore side, so people can get in and wander around.

Mr. Guthrie reiterates that it is functioning wetland, pointing out the vegetation and the ducks living there. Whether it is a quality functioning wetland is another question. Mr. Guthrie is pretty sure it receives storm water, but he hasn't seen any maps that show what is draining in there. During high groundwater periods, the basin is connected to the lake. In cases like that, it isn't treating any of the storm water it gets. Mr. Guthrie cites his having driven an 18-foot boat in there, right in from the lake when the lake was high. If the basin wants to treat storm water, it needs work.

There is an existing recharge basin, which Mr. Guthrie points out, noting that it is possibly a county basin but he is not completely sure. To him, it would make a whole lot more sense, to run storm water into that recharge basin instead of into a wetland right next to the lake. There may be elevation issues by the recharge basin. Mr. Guthrie does not know the elevation of the property. He does not know how deep the basin is or how much it slopes down. One point is lower than another, as he points out on an image, because one point has groundwater in it.

The elevation issues need to be addressed and is one of the first things that will need to be done in any future planning. An elevation survey is also needed so people know where everything is.

The year before, The DEC completed a rebuild of its fishing access site on Forge Pond on the Peconic River. Mr. Guthrie presents a conceptual design of the site, noting that the project turned out pretty much the way it looks in the plan. The site has a directional flow of traffic. It has car-and-trailer parking spots, including one where a car and trailer can park and pull straight down into the water. It has additional car-only parking spots, including one which is handicap-accessible. It has a concrete ramp with a loading dock next to the ramp, which is not present in Lake Ronkonkoma. The site also has an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant canoe and kayak launch. This launch is a floating dock with a roller launch for canoes and kayaks. The site has parking for ten cars and trailers and five cars. In terms of what it can handle, the Forge Pond location is roughly the same size as the Lake Ronkonkoma site.

The DEC can also redesign the biofiltration basin into a functioning wetland. They would work to route as much storm water away from the lake as possible.

Mr. Guthrie points out that Forge Pond fishing site wasn't paved but instead has gravel. He notes that this is a decision that can be made by the community. If it is paved, it is sloped away from the lake and something like catch basins are put in so the runoff goes into the ground. The site can instead have gravel. Either option is possible. The DEC would include that in the landscaping plan that points out native vegetation. They would look to control and perhaps eradicate the invasive species in the area. The DEC could get all of the necessary permits.

In regards to funding, Mr. Guthrie explains that the Forge Pond fishing site cost nearly a half a million dollars. It was funded primarily through the State Environmental Protection Fund, which the Bureau of Fisheries has access to. The DEC also gets federal sport Fish Restoration funds, a fraction of which must be used for boat access. There are other funding sources. Mr. Guthrie hopes that any project like this would be a joint project between the state and the county.

The DEC works with the people involved in an inter-municipal agreement. As a New York State waterway, Lake Ronkonkoma is eligible for local waterfront revitalization money, for which this project would be perfect.

The DEC has the capability to develop a plan, oversee the bid documents, and oversee the contracts from start to finish. If there is positive input, they can proceed. It is noted that the plans will not happen quickly to allow for community input. Mr. Guthrie notes that he, and the DEC, would like a consensus that this would be good for the community and that people would like to see it happening.

Due to the property in question being presently owned by the County there are two scenarios that the State is given permission to work on the property or it is transferred over to NYS. Mr. Guthrie is asked how much the 10.2 acres cost and how much of it the DEC would use. Mr. Guthrie recommends starting out by surveying the entire property and then let the designers come up with some conceptual plans based on what's there. The DEC could use just a little of the land or most of it. It depends entirely on how much they want to do. They have to decide how much parking they want to have to go with the fishing pier if a fishing pier is being included. They have to decide how many car-and-trailer spots they need. A rule of thumb for this is one car-and-trailer spot for every ten acres. Lake Ronkonkoma has 240 acres, which would be twenty-four spots. Currently, there are nine, meaning it would be a pretty substantial increase. Forge Pond is only 120 acres and has ten car-and-trailer spots, just a little below the ten-acre rule.

As the parcels in question are located within the Town of Islip members on the committee feel that the Town of Islip should be involved, to which Mr. Guthrie agrees. Mr. Guthrie decided to bring the proposal before the committee due to the presence of members from

both the Towns and County. This is the one venue he knows of where all of the stakeholders are involved to some degree.

It is noted by a committee member that the presence of the “No Trespassing” signs would suggest that neighbors along Victory Drive have complained to the Town regarding unauthorized access to the area. This same committee member also worries about the effect the development and subsequent activity would have both on the community and lake. They note that before any plans are underway they would like to consult with the residents located next to the land for their opinions and thoughts.

Conversation shifts to the bio-filtration basin and how people say it’s failing. Mr. Guthrie is asked for his assessment of this notion. Mr. Guthrie replies that he is pretty sure it is accepting storm water and that the wetland is treating the storm water to one degree or another. From that prospective, you could call it a bio-filtration basin. By that definition, the lake is technically a bio-filtration basin. Mr. Guffree states that the point is to treat the storm water before it goes into the lake. If the lake is low, the water goes into the ground and is treated. When the lake is high and connected to the basin, then there is no treatment.

Mr. Guthrie also answers a question relating to the houses located near the areas in question and that the parking spaces would be located away from the houses with the potential for significant vegetation buffering between the parking lot and houses. Mr. Guthrie notes that if the DEC is allowed to use the County and State properties as one and can figure out the best way to redo it, there isn’t any reason that, when the project is done, the old ramp and parking lot are ripped up and the new ramp and parking lot are in a different location with new vegetation planted. This would ensure distance for the homes currently close to the site.

One committee member is worried that the changes to the parking lot location would only benefit Victory Drive and result in increased traffic along the residences of Richmond Boulevard. Mr. Guthrie, points out that while that could be true it largely depends on the exact location of the site and that there are specific locations on the land that would allow for a certain distance from the houses.

Security of the location in question is then brought up with Mr. Guthrie noting that it can be addressed. Currently, the Lake Ronkonkoma site is not lighted. The DEC environmental conservation officers visit as often as they can but they are obviously not there all the time. The DEC received concerns about illegal activity at their Forge Pond site and, unlike for the vast majority of their sites across the state, they agreed to put in lighting. The lighting they used for Forge Pond is solar powered, Dark Sky certified, and is equipped with motion detectors. When someone drives into the site, the lights turn on upon entry and stay on for fifteen minutes. When fishermen come in he will have the light to launch his boat or, if he comes in after dark from the lake, he's got light as he pulls out his boat. If somebody comes in there wanting to do something immoral and the lights come on, chances are they're going to leave. Mr. Guthrie admits that nearby residents may not like the lights shining in their windows, which is another issue.

Questions are raised in relation to the pier located near the old Bavarian Inn parcel and what would happen to it if this project moves forward. Mr. Guffree personally feels that Lake Ronkonkoma could handle two fishing piers. The county had been talking about putting a boat livery at the inn, not a place for people to launch their boats. The DEC facility is a place for the general public to launch their boats. Mr. Guthrie says the DEC is not proposing any changes for the Inn's pier, including the Inn's allowance of gas motors. The public can launch fishing and

recreational boats, including canoes, kayaks, and sailboats, from the site, which is not what the Inn is looking to do.

Mr. Guthrie notes that funding for site maintenance is primarily from the federal sport Fish Restoration grant that the state receives every year. He reiterates that 15% of that grant must be spent on public access, which includes maintaining existing sites. The DEC Operations Unit hires one person every year to clean the fishing access sites. This person visits the sites at least once a week during the season to empty trash cans, pick up trash, and to make sure the site is well maintained. The DEC would also have their environmental conservation officers and forest rangers patrol the site, though they obviously will not be there all the time.

Mr. Guthrie knows that the existing site has had problems with illegal activities. According to DEC regulations, the fishing site has two permissible uses, launching a boat or fishing. If someone is there for any other reason, they're there illegally. People are not allowed to picnic, they're not allowed to walk their dog, or other things. The new site would be the same as that.

Mr. Guthrie notes that there is a reasonable chance, this year, to get a boat steward for Lake Ronkonkoma. If that happens, the DEC would have staff at the site at least from 7AM to 4PM on Saturdays and Sundays and possibly some more during the week and on some evenings as well. The boat steward's primary duty is to inform people about invasive species. They can offer to inspect boats coming into and leaving the lake and explain to people what the rules and regulations are regarding boats and transporting invasive species. In addition, they can take data on the use of the site, what kind of boats are being launched, how many, what other uses are people having for the site, such as parking and going to the park, are people picnicking on the beach, etc. The boat steward has no enforcement authority but he does have a phone and can call

enforcement if there's a problem. This would provide a good base of background information on the level of use now and a little of an idea on the demand and would help the DEC in designing the future site.

Mr. Guthrie reiterates the permissible uses, fishing and boating, and noting that sailboats are fine. The only restriction on boating is that gas motors are not allowed. Someone asks a question but is too far from the microphone to be heard beyond the room. Mr. Guthrie noted that county and state doing some sort of land swap if they can find a piece of state land in Islip that county parks wants. The DEC has bought land from counties in the past. They bought a parcel on the Peconic River from the county. This is fully open to discussion.

From the DEC's prospective, it would be cleanest if it became state land. It would be the DEC's responsibility. They would be building a facility on their property. They've had problems in the past where they built a facility on town property and then, after a certain amount of time, the town said "thanks, but now, only town residents can use it". The DEC is not open to this anymore.

Mr. Guthrie says that the project would likely take a minimum of five years. He advises that, if everyone thinks it's a good idea and want to present it to the community, the faster they do that, the better. If everyone was fired up and really wanted this, there is potential for three years. If, for instance, the governor got wind of this and thought he'd get some good press, he could shorten the process by about a year.

Mr. Guthrie says there are definitely engineering issues that need to be addressed. They are beyond him. He notes that the water level in Forge Pond fluctuates about a foot. The water level in Lake Ronkonkoma fluctuates up to eight feet. A floating dock is a better alternative as it can be adjusted with the rising and falling of the water levels. Mr. Guthrie isn't sure about the

canoe and Kayak launch because that's a point launch. Since Lake Ronkonkoma is essentially a beach, a beach launch could be a good option.

Someone asks if there would be any potential for increasing the geese population because of the fishing. Mr. Guthrie doesn't see the geese population increasing and notes that, the more people you have in the lake, the less likely you are to have geese.

After the conclusion of Mr. Guthrie's presentation the conversation is shifted to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Towns and any potential updates. It is stated that there is no update on the MOU. The MOU is completed and the organization created by the MOU has to meet.

One committee member notes that this fishing access site project facilitates cooperation between the town, state, and county. A committee had been created to investigate the condition of the lake. The committee's intention was not to meet publicly. The committee could hold a public meeting where people would be notified and would have the opportunity to come and speak. The decision to do this would be up to the committee. At this point, it is unclear if the committee was even established. Scientists at Stony Brook University were consulted.

It is noted that a dilemma facing Lake Ronkonkoma is its population density and is compared with the Town of Brookhaven and their problems relating to the Carmans River.

Mr. Guthrie notes that, on Long Island, that there are two watersheds that must be looked at when proposing development, the surface watershed and the ground watershed. Contributory factors in each must be observed. It is noted that when the MOU was drafted, they studied the ground watershed.

With no other business the meeting is closed.