

New look for Lake Helen under consideration

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
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Officials: Restored lakes often mean more tourists, money.

With state, federal and local funding, Lake Helen could be cleaned and more tourist dollars funneled into town.

At a special meeting Aug. 10, Gothenburg City Council members, the mayor and city officials heard representatives from state agencies talk about grants and how the lake could be changed into a more usable one.

That could mean more anglers and other recreation enthusiasts spending dollars locally.

Silt has filled much of the lake since it was dredged in 1977 and, in recent years, shallow water, warmer temperatures and nutrients—such as high nitrogen and phosphorous concentrations—have caused fish to die and a toxic algae to grow.

City officials unsuccessfully applied for funds through the Community Lake Enhancement and Restoration (CLEAR) Program in 2005 but were denied.

The price tag for that project was an estimated \$1.6 million.

Mark Porath, who manages the Aquatic Habitat Program through Nebraska Game and Parks (G&P), said lakes 20 acres and smaller with a \$300,000 rehabilitation cost limit were considered for the program at the time.

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Those requirements have since changed which could bode well for 58-acre Lake Helen.

Through the Aquatic Habitat Program, Porath said more than 50 lakes have been rehabilitated and \$40 million spent.

He noted that the program has been successful because of the number of partners involved and feasibility of the projects.

Brad Newcomb, NGP south-central district manager of the fisheries division, said the city needs to aggressively get more parties involved.

Newcomb said Lake Helen is on a list of possible projects, identified through public input, as a candidate for rehabilitation which will help when applying for grant funds.



Public access to the lake and its usefulness for fishing and other recreational activities will also enhance the application, said Paul Brakhage, Clean Lakes Program coordinator through the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality.

“And without water quality, fishing is not of the quality it should be,” Brakhage said.

Bass fishermen and women from Nebraska and other states now flock to Cottonmill Lake in Kearney, Newcomb said.

Cottonmill, which was restored through the Aquatic Habitat Program, is getting a return on the money invested to rehabilitate it, Porath said.

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“It’s possible we could do the same here,” Newcomb said. “Cottonmill was in a whole lot worse shape than this one.”

Brakhage noted that projects with large price tags and low benefit put them out of the reach and scope of the CLEAR program.

A \$1.6 million cost to restore Lake Helen might have difficulty getting funded, he said.

“You may have to look at other options,” Porath said.

The group talked about deepening the southwest corner of the lake more than 12 feet and sloping the bottom to the eastern shore—part of which could be filled in to pare down the size.

“You would exchange a large shallow lake for maybe something deeper with better quality habitat,” Porath said Monday.

City engineer Travis Mason of Miller & Associates Consulting Engineers said decreasing the size of the project could cut costs in half.

Officials said the lake would have to be drained for excavation and the bottom sealed.

The lake, which once belonged to the Nebraska Public Power District for irrigation, now belongs to the city but is still connected to the NPPD canal system.

Canal water feeds the lake although NPPD doesn’t use it anymore to control water. Groundwater is also pumped into the lake when needed, especially in the fall and winter when the canal has been drained.

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Porath said habitat-degrading fish would be removed and the lake re-stocked with quality game fish such as bass and blue gill that need quality habitat.

A waterfowl management plan would be an important part of the project which would mean the minimization of geese, agency officials said.

In addition to possible funds from the Aquatic Habitat Program, Environmental Trust Fund, EPA 319 Clean Water Act funds, money could be available from the Central Platte Natural Resources District.

If the city has a water right to the lake, Central Platte manager Ron Bishop said the city could sell it to the NRD to help fund the project.

On Tuesday, city administrator Bruce Clymer said he still didn't know if the city had a water right to the lake.

"I know we have a well right and I think we're using NPPD's water storage right," Clymer said.

If the project seems feasible, the agency representatives said they thought funding could be available but noted that a city match is required—part of which could be done with in-kind labor.

Brakhage said serious partners need to be involved, noting that entities take better care of projects if they have some ownership.

Porath also suggested a cooperative agreement between the city, which would maintain local control and management, and parties involved.

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For the city, agency officials said the next step would be to gather water samples from the lake to identify pollutants, their amount and the cost to fix the problem.

Clymer said they will begin taking samples as soon as NDEQ officials get them started.

The group plans to meet again this fall to see if there are any “show stoppers.”

“Each project is unique and some situations can’t be solved,” Porath said. “But we can try to work together to fix them.”

Agency officials said it’s important to keep the public informed throughout the process.

“In communities where lakes have been redone, they’ve realized that it keeps people in town,” Brakhage said, noting that preliminary designs should be shared with the public and input encouraged.

Jeff Kennedy, city council president, said Gothenburg typically does things right and would want to do the same with the Lake Helen project.

Mayor Joyce Hudson said the cleanup of Lake Helen will be put on the agenda for consideration at some point.

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