

# If court approves

## Lake to dry up while county fixes dike

**By Mike Scanlon**  
staff writer

If everything goes according to plan, Pontiac Lake will disappear sometime in October.

Temporarily.

The Oakland County Board of Commissioners agreed last week a set up a \$300,000 assessment district to repair an earthen dam in a system of seven Pontiac Lake dikes. The dike was found potentially unsafe in a December engineering study. Final approval of the project rests with circuit court.

Fixing the dam will require "drawing down" the lake nine feet to expose the dam. That engineering study projects the required draw-down will cause the man-made lake to cease to exist. The lake is expected to re-fill during the spring thaw.

MEANWHILE, THE state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) tentatively plans a \$140,000 secondary project, including engineering on how fast to let the water out, when to let it back in, drilling a deep well to help refill the lake and some clean-up work of the lake bottom.

The DNR project hinges on acquiring a federal grant, but the 500 persons who own property adjoining the lake will have to pay the \$300,000 dam repair cost.

County commissioners clashed on whether they should offer interest-free special assessment payments to those property owners.

County officials estimate the special assessments, collected on top of property tax bills, will boost those bills about 12 percent annually for seven consecutive years.

Breaking sharply along partisan lines, commissioners finally voted 16-8 to approve interest-free

assessments, and 18-5 to OK the repair plan itself. Jurisdiction over the project will fall to the county drain commissioner, since the dam repairs will be technically classified as efforts to guarantee the lake level. A 1944 county order established the level of Pontiac Lake at 962.83 feet above sea level. Such "lake level" projects rest with drain commissioners.

PONTIAC LAKE was created nearly 60 years ago by a system of eight earthen dikes damming the Huron River in a low area carved out by glaciers. The dam was raised in height in 1957.

The engineering study found that the eighth dike in the system was removed. But nobody knows when it was removed or who did it.

The 1980 engineering study was a follow-up to a 1979 study that was part of a congressionally-ordered national survey of dam safety.

The earlier survey discovered what were believed to be animal burrows in Dam No. 1. However, the county's own 1980 study by the engineering firm of Halpert Associates determined the burrows were likely the result of finer particles of soil filtering out of the inside of the dam, a form of erosion.

Engineers estimated that the impact of any dam failure would be softened by the seven other dikes in the system, allowing time to alert downstream homeowners and to close off nearby M-59 and Pontiac Road, both of which would likely be flooded in a dam failure.

THE ENGINEERS recommended that the lake level be lowered nine feet, to 953 feet above sea level, and the top of the dam dug out to 965 feet above sea level.

Doing that, the engineers conceded, will reduce

the lake level almost to where it would fall naturally. It means the lake will virtually disappear. Wide, foul-smelling mudflats are likely to be exposed. Lowering the level may also temporarily dry up a number of shallow wells in the Huron River Valley system.

Engineers recommend the project be carried out in winter, when they said demand for well water will be less and ice on the exposed mudflats will cut the small.

In the repair itself, engineers recommended pea gravel intended to aid drainage and inhibit internal erosion be piled on top of the trimmed dam, fill dirt added to recap the dam, the downstream face bulldozed to a two-to-one slope and the top of the 16-foot wide dam compacted a minimum of 10 times.

The upstream slope of the dam needs protection against erosion by waves, the engineers found. Their recommended solution was the addition of "rip rap," an assortment of gravel and broken concrete to stop the waves from striking the dirt. Minor cracks in the concrete spillways of the dam will also be repaired.

Pontiac Lake is a noted bass fishing site, and DNR officials believe the project will benefit the lake's fishery.

"By drawing the lake down we're probably going to selectively remove the stunted fish," said Al Massey, in charge of DNR inland lake management. "The lake does have a good bass fishery, but it also has some stunted bluegills. There was a department intention of doing a chemical removal of stunted fish this summer anyway."

Massey said an aeration device will be installed in a deep basin where valuable gamefish are most likely to congregate while the lake level is reduced.

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