

Act now to ensure the future of our Finger Lakes

For all of us who care about the clean waters of our Finger Lakes, Maryland State Sen. Bernie Fowler has a cautionary tale that deserves our attention. Fowler grew up on the shores of the Patuxent River, a major tributary to the Chesapeake Bay.

He recalls being able to see his feet easily while standing chest high in the river, searching for crabs as a boy. By 1988, water quality in both the river and the bay had declined significantly since the days of his youth. Fowler vowed to use his position as a senator to fight for cleaner water in these areas.

To call attention to the condition of these waters, he started an annual "wade-in" to gauge the river's clarity. For almost a decade, visibility steadily improved, from a low of eight inches to a high of more than 44 inches. To some degree, this improvement reflected substantial public investments as well as private initiatives to control runoff within the river's watershed.

Unfortunately, since a high point in 1996, water clarity has generally declined as intensive development pressures have outstripped conservation efforts. Today, 60 million gallons of wastewater flow into the Patuxent. This flow includes excessive amounts of nitrogen and phosphorous which serve to upset the river's nutrient balance and foster the growth of algae.

Today, Bernie Fowler fears for the future of his beloved river, just as an increasing number of Finger Lakes residents share these same fears for our beautiful lakes. While our development pressures are nowhere near those of central Maryland, they are growing and bringing with them growing threats to our water quality.

According to Canandaigua Lake Watershed Program Manager Kevin Olvany, there are now proposals for up to 1,000 new homes coming into the Canandaigua Watershed during the next 10 to 15 years. This intensity of development may have a profound effect on water quality, particularly when homes are built on steep hillsides or in close proximity to streams and wetlands.

Elsewhere in our region, we're seeing the development of our last remaining pristine shorelines and increasing development of the hillsides overlooking the lakes. Local residents are increasingly concerned about water quality impacts associated with these developments, as well as the loss of scenic views. Rooftops and paved roads serve to accelerate runoff rather than letting rainfall absorb into the ground. Design standards and careful construction techniques can minimize some of these impacts, but we will fail our lakes if we do not take action now to ensure their future.

While our region is blessed by an abundance of open land, development frequently takes place on those lands that are the most environmentally sensitive. Who doesn't want to live near the water or on a hilltop with an outstanding view of the lake?

To ensure the future of our lakes, we must ensure the protection of those wetland areas, streamside corridors, and steep sloped hillsides that are vital for the maintenance of water quality. Through the use of conservation easements (legal agreements that protect privately owned land), we can keep these lands in the hands of local families while securing their conservation values, while a growing number of

While a growing number of municipalities are creating local open space programs, more support for both private and public land conservation is needed. In addition, local governments must ensure that their building and subdivision codes are adequate to protect fragile lands. Does your town call for a streamside buffer zone for new construction?

Lastly, we need to better understand the health of our lakes. Ongoing research and monitoring is needed as is greater citizen involvement. So, start your own tradition and wade out into the lake and look for your feet!

For additional information about conservation easements and the Finger Lakes Land Trust, please contact its Ithaca office at 607-275-9487 or visit the Land Trust's web site at www.fllt.org.