

Smart Growth Grant in Action West Milford Environmental Commission and the Case of the Disappearing Lake

The West Milford Environmental Commission performed an extremely valuable service for its residents by bringing together technical experts, citizens, and state and municipal officials to openly examine, debate and ultimately develop a community-supported plan to solve a local environmental problem.

The rural township of West Milford in northern Passaic County has many lakes, around which modest lake communities grew in the mid-1900s. One such lake community sits across the street from a shopping center in what is now the town's central business district. The 12-acre lake at its core, West Milford Lake, was created by damming a tributary of the Belchers Creek, which flows to Greenwood Lake.

The dam at West Milford Lake deteriorated over time, and is now classified by the State as a "high hazard" dam. The lake community association was unable to raise enough money for the necessary repairs. In 2005 it ceded responsibility for mitiga-



Fred Lubnow of Princeton Hydro presenting alternatives for West Milford Lake project.

Photo by Ann Genader

tion to the NJ Bureau of Dam Safety, which will carry out a controlled breach of the dam to eliminate the potential for a sudden collapse and flood.

The West Milford Environmental Commission was concerned about the situation at West Milford Lake for a number of reasons. Although privately-owned, the lake's location in the center of town made it significant for the community at large. Once drained, the lake bottom could become an eyesore that would quickly be overrun by invasive vegetation. In addition, the lake and tributary were contributing high levels of phosphorous (a nutrient that facilitates excessive algae growth) into Greenwood Lake. The Commission hoped that any breaching or renovation project could incorporate strategies to reduce the total phosphorous content of water flowing downstream. They also wanted to explore the potential for creating public access, or possibly a nature observation area, on the site, which would become a floodplain after the lake was reduced to a stream once again by the breaching.

The situation was complex, involving unhappy lake community residents, state agency mandates, and township officials who knew they had no legal control over a dam issue on private property. So the Environmental Commission strategized with West Milford planning staff on a *plan to make a plan*. They wanted to hire a

limnologist who could help the town and the residents examine their technical options with regard to the site and the stream, post-breach. They hoped that, after learning the facts, all parties could agree on a plan that would be good for the town, the lake community residents, and the environment.

The Commission applied for and obtained a Smart Growth Planning Grant from ANJEC in June 2007, and set to work right away. They hired two consultants - Princeton Hydro, a firm that specializes in lake and dam issues, and Dr. Les Lynn, a local resident and biology professor. Princeton Hydro would do the technical tasks and develop a final report, while Dr. Lynn would act as advisor to the Commission and assist with outreach to lake community residents. The project kickoff meeting took place in August 2007.

While Princeton Hydro gathered and analyzed data on the lake and its bed, the Commission planned an outreach program, including a series of community meetings at which all of the issues and options could be explored. With township GIS specialist Rob Sparkes, the Commission developed informational articles for the local newspapers and sent individual letters to lake community residents, inviting them to learn more and have their say by attending public meetings.

The project team and consultants toured the lake site with a representative from NJDEP prior to the first community meeting. On September 10th, Princeton Hydro and the Commission presented initial information about the dam breach and the goals of the project to a packed house at town hall. Many lake community residents were angry about the breaching, and that topic dominated the meeting. The consultants and Commission worked hard to help residents understand the inevitability of the breaching by the state, and the need for proactive planning for the site.

At the next community meeting, in November, the discussion moved on to what could be done once the dam was breached. The consultants introduced three possible scenarios that would help to

improve water quality and produce a visually pleasant result - a constructed wetland surrounding the new stream channel; a constructed wetland with added areas of smaller open water habitats (micro ponds); or a meandering stream channel between the forebay and a smaller remnant lake, which would create a riparian flood-plain habitat around the channel.

The Commission worked with Rob Sparkes to provide a continual flow of comprehensive public information about the project to the press, and through the Township website and letters to the lake community. They obtained additional resident feedback through a survey. The Commission was pleased to find that the survey reflected support for reducing nutrient levels, providing wildlife habitat, and developing nature-related recreation opportunities at the site.

A fourth community meeting included a slide presentation, which provided additional opportunities for residents to understand the options for West Milford Lake. In consultation with the Environmental Commission, Princeton Hydro revised the three concept plans based on its own analysis as well as public feedback, and made a final report at the last community meeting in February 2008 that can be found on the West Milford Township Environmental Commission web page (www.westmilford.org).

The Commission, Planning Board and Township Council subsequently agreed on



West Milford Lake

Photo by Ann Genader

their preferred option of the three scenarios, although additional field sampling of sediments under the lake will be required to make the final determination. The Township Council has endorsed further investigation into the possibility of acquiring the lake parcel through West Milford's open space program, and NJDEP has expressed support for future grant funding to implement the post-breaching plan of West Milford's choice.

This project is a "textbook example" of an environmental commission fulfilling its assigned roles - conducting research, coordinating activities, performing community outreach and making recommendations on local environmental protection. It must be exactly what the NJ Legislature had in mind when it approved the enabling legislation for environmental commissions in 1968. 🌱