

Friday, June 12, 2009

County should help solve weed woes

It is disappointing that Sussex County, a strong proponent, even a leader, of shared services, chose to not participate in a temporary governmental coalition to battle Lake Hopatcong's growing weed problem.

The county is conspicuous by its absence in that all other impacted government units are participating in some fashion.

County Administrator John Eskilson explained, "We are stretched ourselves and can't afford it."

Freeholder Director Glen Vetrano went a step further saying that even if the county had the manpower to send, it wouldn't. Vetrano said the state had plenty of warning about what would happen, yet chose not to fund the necessary positions.

"Where does it end for us?" Vetrano asks of the county picking up the tab for the state. "Is this a shared service situation or doing the state's job, taking them off the hook?"

Vetrano points out there are other state lakes in the county that could then ask the county for help, such as Swartswood, which also has a weed problem. "How far do we spread our resources?"

Vetrano says the state has already "dumped the deer issue back on us" requiring the county to be responsible for collection and disposal of dead deer along the roadways. The state recently increased its costs to the county for residents who are placed in state mental institutions, and has put the cost of farmland preservation efforts entirely on the county, Vetrano said. "There's no end to it!"

Vetrano also said the state's willingness to fund a supervisor is not only inadequate, but "a slap in the face to the other entities." He takes exception that the state can find money "for a guy in a suit to manage the situation" but can't find money for a couple of guys to operate the harvesters.

The lack of county participation is regrettable, Vetrano said, and should in "no way, shape or form be regarded as a knock against (LHC chairman) Art Ondish," who he called the "biggest advocate I've ever seen" for proper management of the lake.

As laudable as the county's arguments may be against assisting in the effort, it doesn't help those who need it now. Punishing local residents and businesses to make a point to the state is mis-directed frustration. The state is not going to all of a sudden throw money it doesn't have into Lake Hopatcong. And as much as we can justify this as a state problem, the pain is local.

Most of the assistance being given by other entities is in the form of labor, and most of that part-time, and use of storage facilities. Some of the offers have included conditions such as Mount Arlington's which agreed to loan an employee "providing the needs of the borough are covered."

It appears it wouldn't take much to show support and demonstrate a community partnership.

As it is, the scaled-down plan will, at best, try to stay ahead of the floating weeds, according to Ondish, who described the makeshift plan as "very, very minimal" and asks the public to maintain low expectations.

Unfortunately, the lake's problem of low water levels which has already negatively impacted the season, is causing more aggressive growth of the weeds, exacerbating the troubles. The lower level has allowed sunlight to penetrate deeper, and that, along with warmer water temperatures, again due to its lower level, have created conditions conducive to the weeds growth.

In previous years the commission has operated six weed harvesters to stay ahead of the growth. This year's patchwork plan hopes to have three harvesters ready to go by the Fourth of July holiday.

Should the state fully fund the Lake Hopatcong Commission charged with maintaining the lake? Absolutely! Is that going to happen this season? Absolutely not!

Fingers can be pointed at Trenton all day long. But that doesn't solve the problem or help those whose livelihoods and investments rely on a healthy and maintained lake.

It would behoove the county to reconsider its stance and join the coalition in some form.