



Lakes Advisory Committee Item

Meeting Date: August 28, 2024

Agenda Item: Lakes District : List of Benefits to the Community

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BACKGROUND

(Enter the who, what when, where, why)

Q & A on Creating a Lakes District

- **So What is a Lakes District?**

A lake district is a specialized unit of government designed to manage a lake or group of lakes. One of the major differences between a lake district and a lake association is a lake district's ability to tax property within the district. Since 1974, when Wisconsin passed legislation allowing the formation of lake districts, over 200 lake communities have formed lake districts.

Lake districts have a unique blend of powers and governance provisions tailored to fit the needs of local lake communities. A lake district is guided and operated by those that live in or own property in the district. A lake district's day-to-day operations are carried out by a board of commissioners composed of elected volunteers and local officials. The financial direction of the district is determined by district residents (electors) and property owners at an annual meeting. Unlike other governmental units, such as towns or sanitary districts, nonresident property owners have the right to vote and hold office in lake districts.

Lake districts in Wisconsin have tremendous opportunities to address lake and watershed management issues. The Wisconsin Legislature has consistently recognized their potential by giving lake districts legal standing, the ability to tax, and eligibility for cost sharing funds and other state assistance. Governmental units, including lake districts, enjoy the advantages of automatically being exempt from federal income tax.

Since the 1970s, lake districts have shown that small public institutions can achieve remarkable results when it comes to lake management. A key to lake district success is a core of dedicated volunteer leaders willing to learn and work hard to maintain their lake. Through the work of these individuals, Wisconsin communities have identified and addressed threats to water quality, restored habitat, improved recreational boating and generally enhanced the vitality of inland lakes in the state.

A lake district is not a club. Unlike a lake association, a lake district is a governmental body with statutory responsibilities to the resource, local citizens and taxpayers. Like all government entities, the powers and operations of a lake district are set by law with legal responsibilities and consequences designed to ensure that the rights and interests of the public are protected.

- **How can a Lake District be Formed?**

A city or village may establish a lake district by a simple resolution, provided that all the frontage of the lake is within the city or village, (except any portions outside the state of Wisconsin).

A petition of property owners is not required for the creation of a district by a city council or village board. The resolution establishing the district is adopted in the same manner as resolutions for other municipal business. The law does not require a public hearing to be held in connection with establishing the district. However, most incorporated municipalities do schedule a public hearing or informational meeting on creation of a lake district in order to provide an opportunity for public comment, in the interest of fairness and open government.

When a district is established by a city or village, the city council or village board generally serves as the board of commissioners. These municipal districts are otherwise governed like other lake districts, with an annual meeting of electors and property owners determining the district's budget and tax levy.

In situations where the governing body of a city or village serves as the board of commissioners of a lake district, they sometimes consider establishing a citizen advisory committee or other structure to include citizen input.

The city council or village board is required to provide for an election of the board of commissioners if a petition requesting that form of governance is filed. The petition must be signed by at least 20% of property owners within the district. Upon presentation of such a petition, an election must be held at the next annual or special meeting of the district, whichever occurs first. In that case, the new board of commissioners will consist of elected representatives as well as two appointed representatives, one from the county and one from the city or village. The new board of commissioners will become effective immediately after the election (unless there is a challenge to the election results initiated in circuit court within 14 days of the election).

- **How does this benefit me?**

Ensures Sustainability

Plan for Long-Term Maintenance: Address how the lakes district will be maintained and sustained over the long term to reassure the community of its lasting benefits.

- The Lakes District can: Buy & Operate an aquatic plant harvester, develop a lake management plan, develop an aquatic plant management plan, develop a water recreation plan, contract for aquatic plant removal and maintain lake access.

Promote Environmental Stewardship: Emphasize sustainable practices and environmental conservation to align with community values, concerns and priorities.

Additional Funding: A Lake District has more opportunities for Grant Funding that goes directly to lake improvements that are decided and voted on by the people

Build Community Engagement

Foster Participation: Encourage community involvement in the planning and implementation process. This can help build ownership and commitment.

Organize Events: Host informational sessions, workshops, and community events to educate and engage people about the lakes.

Understand the Community's Needs and Concerns: Identify key issues or needs within the community, such as economic development, environmental conservation, recreation, or tourism.

- Who do I contact with questions/concerns/comments?
Board of Commissioners, Appointed Commissioners, Officers and City of Whitewater appointed Staff.

PREVIOUS ACTIONS – COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS
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(Dates, committees, action taken)

FINANCIAL IMPACT

(If none, state N/A)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

ATTACHMENT(S) INCLUDED

(If none, state N/A)
