

Proposed pit would jeopardize health of the lakes

Editor's note: We wanted to get opinion from an aquatic expert on how the proposed gravel mining operation slated for U.S. 12 could affect area lakes, and sought out the advice of Scott Brown.

Brown currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Michigan Waterfront Alliance, and the Michigan Chapter of the North American Lake Management Society. He holds a Master of Science in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, a Michigan State University Institute of Water Research Certification in Watershed Management, and is a Michigan Natural Shoreline Partnership Certified Michigan Natural Shoreline Professional.

Brown is a native of Brooklyn, and is familiar with our area lakes, streams and wetlands.

By Scott Brown

Let there be no question – the request for a conditional land use permit that would allow for the operation of a gravel mine in the heart of our Irish Hills, located within a stone's throw of five ecologically sensitive, high quality inland lakes that each make significant contributions to this area's local charm, economy, and culture needs to be met with a resounding "No!"

The magnificent chain of inland lakes - Wolf, Allen, Meadow, Kelly, and Killarney – and the scenic hills, meadows, woodlands, streams, and wetlands that so gracefully surround these freshwater gems in the heart of our Irish Hills are a creation of the advance and retreat of immense glaciers that occurred in this region up until about 10,000 years ago. Each of the lakes in this unique chain-of-lakes continues to be defined by relatively low nutrient levels and diverse native aquatic plant communities that help sustain their healthy, clear water aquatic

ecosystems that are suitable for swimming, fishing, water skiing, and all forms of water-borne recreation. It is important to recognize that the high quality of each of these ecologically sensitive inland lakes is a direct reflection of their relatively unperturbed surrounding landscapes comprised of wetlands, woodlands, and meadows.

Outside of the nominal tax revenue increase that Cambridge Township may derive from the operation of a gravel mine, it becomes almost impossible to formulate a rational argument in favor of allowing such a disruptive project to proceed. In addition to the noise associated with the operation of heavy equipment, the high volumes of dust and dirt that would inevitably be generated, and traffic safety concerns related to a non-stop procession of large trucks coming in and out of the mine, permitting the establishment of a gravel mine at a site located just off Killarney Road in close proximity to an ecologically sensitive

chain of lakes would not only jeopardize the long-term health and viability of each of the lakes but also cause a sharp decline in the real estate value of the many homes that exist on or near the lakes in the area.

There is no hiding the fact that gravel mining is a dirty, noisy, and inherently disruptive business that requires the removal of the upper most layers of the earth's surface in order to gain access to underlying resources which, in the glacially carved landscape of the Irish Hills, often includes stone, sand, and gravel. The very real potential for this type of mining to severely degrade the aquatic ecosystems of nearby surface water bodies and to disrupt the natural flow of water has been proven time and again. The risk of harm to nearby lakes and streams dramatically increases as the mining operation begins by removing the upper most layer of the earth's surface along with the highly beneficial vegetation that serves to prevent high volumes of soil

from dislodging and running into local waterways as nutrient laden pollution during rainfall. In addition to increasing the overall volume of harmful surface water runoff, large scale loss of natural vegetation in favor of denuded soil also acts to prevent soil from retaining moisture, and interrupts the natural water recharge cycle. This can lead to reductions in both the quality and quantity of nearby ground water aquifers that serve to provide local homes and businesses with freshwater, and contribute vast amounts of water to local inland lakes.

It is also important to recognize that large scale loss of native plant vegetation in favor of bare soil also significantly increases the level of dust that ultimately settles on everything in sight within areas that extend well beyond the physical boundaries of the gravel mine. Drastic increases in the level of airborne soil in the form of dust can also negatively impact inland lakes as the harmful nutrients present in the dust are easily absorbed into nearby surface waters. Allowing the now healthy inland lakes in the area to be exposed to substantially greater levels of nutrients via polluted runoff and dust would dramatically increase phytoplankton (single celled green algae) growth in the lakes and risk turning their now moderately productive, clear water ecosystems into a less than desirable green algae dominated state – a condition referred to as cultural eutrophication that is next to impossible to reverse.

Similar situations that have occurred within the Great Lakes region tells us that lakefront property values would also experience sharp declines in response to the loss of water clarity, and as the overall quality of life on the lake gradually deteriorates due to the influx of green algae producing nutrients. It is also important to point out that increased nutrient levels exponentially enhances the possibility of the occurrence of toxic blue-green algae blooms similar to the ones that have haunted Lake Erie for so many years.

The good folks working as a group under the name "Protect the Irish Hills – No Gravel Pit" to discourage Cambridge Township's approval of a conditional land use permit that would allow for the operation of a gravel mine in the heart of our Irish Hills have every right to be concerned – they are the local homeowners that will ultimately pay the extremely high costs associated with the operation of a gravel mine. It does not take an economist to quickly determine that the steep costs associated with the operation of a gravel mine in the form of severely diminished water quality in nearby lakes, an explosion of dust, dirt, and debris, loss of peace and quiet, and the permanent loss of the unique sense-of-place and charm that placed our Irish Hills on the map in first place would be lost forever.

The answer is easy Cambridge Township – just say "No".

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