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Lake George Weighs Ban on Phosphorus-Rich Fertilizers

By ANTHONY F. HALL

Lake George's Supervisor wants his town to become the first within the Lake George watershed to ban the use of lawn fertilizers containing phosphorus.

If the ordinance that Supervisor Frank McCoy has proposed is adopted in June, Lake George will not only be the first town within the watershed to limit phosphorus, but the first community within the Adirondack Park to take that step, said John Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council.

"The Lake George Park Commission should follow the town's lead and ban phosphorus in fertilizers everywhere on the lake," said Sheehan.

"Phosphorus is a major contribution to pollution in Lake George," said McCoy. "If we take preventive measures, we can have a positive impact on the water quality of Lake George."

According to Peter Bauer, the executive director of The Fund for Lake George, the heavy use of fertilizers with phosphorus has been linked to the growth of algae.

"A healthy Lake George needs phosphorus to function. Excess phosphorus causes water pollution and accelerates the lake's aging process," said Bauer.

Phosphorus also stimulates the growth of aquatic weeds such as milfoil, said John Sheehan.

"Without the sediment and runoff, there would not be the nutrients in the lake that allows the milfoil to grow," said Sheehan.

The ban would apply to the entire town, not just the lake shore, said McCoy.

"Most of the Town of Lake George is within the watershed; it makes no sense to prohibit the use of fertilizers with phosphorus on the lake but allow it to be used near streams that run into the lake," McCoy said.

Representatives of lake protection groups welcomed McCoy's proposal.

"We think it's a fantastic plan," said Walt Lender, the executive director of the Lake George Association. "Banning the use of fertilizers with phosphorus throughout the town would be more effective than limiting it just along the lake, and we hope the Town Board adopts the Supervisor's proposal."

Peter Bauer of the Fund for Lake George called the proposal "a much needed, bold move."

Added Bauer, "Using phosphorus-free fertilizers is a small inconvenience for the property-owner, but a huge step forward for the lake."

McCoy said he did not anticipate much opposition to the proposal from town residents.

"I have a sense that everyone wants to do the right thing," said McCoy. "Banning fertilizers with phosphorus is to everyone's benefit; by protecting the lake, we protect our property values."

McCoy said that the ban would be adopted through voluntary compliance rather than enforcement.

"We won't have a phosphorus police; we'll rely on education and peer pressure," he said. "If we have 50% compliance, we'll be better off than we were before. Any step we take today is better than what we were doing the day before."

According to Peter Bauer, high levels of phosphorus contribute to the creation every summer of a 'dead zone' in Lake George's south basin.

"In that part of the lake, oxygen levels are depleted due to high nutrient levels, making the water there unable to support fish life," said Bauer.

"Using phosphorus free fertilizers, in addition to adding vegetative buffers to absorb runoff before it reaches water bodies, is a crucial first step in protecting Lake George's water quality," said Peter Bauer.

"The Town of Lake George has stepped up to the plate and shown that it can be a model for every municipality in the watershed," said Bauer.