

# WEIGH IN ON THE WINNEBAGO WATERWAYS

*A Coordinated Public Engagement Effort for  
the Lake Winnebago System*



## Engagement Summary

Prepared by: Biodiversity Project  
Prepared for: Weigh in on the Winnebago Waterways  
Project Steering Team

**Submitted June 18, 2013**

*Photo credits: MindMixer Users jC14 and RonH9.*



**Lake Winnebago and its neighboring waterways are big. But being big can lead to big problems.** Aggressive invasive species like zebra mussels and some plants can choke out the diverse range of plants and animals that feed the sturgeon, walleye and other game fish that anglers seek. Quality trails, parks and water sports opportunities are integral to tourism and maintaining quality of life in the region. Stormwater pollution from nearby cities and farms contribute to ugly, and sometimes toxic, algae. Boat ramps have to be maintained and buoys have to be replaced. Water levels have to be managed to promote boating, but also to allow fish and animals the conditions they need to thrive.

The Steering Team wanted to know which of these issues, or others, the public finds most pressing, and which should be managed from a more coordinated approach. During the public outreach period, we heard that water quality is of concern to most people who participated, but the perception of quality is largely based on geography and how people are using the system. Water quality is most often associated with water clarity, even though biologically, clarity does not necessarily indicate a healthy ecosystem.

#### Commonly Reported Issues Facing the Winnebago Waterways

- Algae Blooms
- Polluted Runoff
- Invasive Species
- Excessive Plants/Vegetation in Waterways
- Phosphorus and Sediment
- Erosion and Wetland Loss
- Water Levels Management

- Lack of Unified Permit System
- Inconsistent Policies across Counties
- Enforcement of Existing Regulations
- Improving Parks & Trails
- Lack of Business Variety
- Lack of Boater Education
- Fishing Regulations

While feedback showed that **all** of these issues are not only important, but very much connected, three main issues stood out and were consistently noted at the public meetings, on surveys and on the website. **These TOP THREE issues are as connected to water quality as the Winnebago Waterways are connected to each other.**

### ALGAE BLOOMS

Although feelings about algae blooms differed slightly depending on where participants live, without question this was one of the top three issues noted through the public input process. Respondents noted that algae blooms impact drinking water, hinder recreation and are the result of *many* sources of pollution, such as chemicals or fertilizers in runoff, high levels of phosphorus in the waterways, direct polluted discharges and dirty water coming from roads and private property.



CREDIT: Fond du Lac County Wisconsin



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### POLLUTED RUNOFF

Feedback from participants around the entire Winnebago system shows that polluted runoff, from various sources, is a major issue that needs to be addressed. Respondents noted the need for native landscaping on shoreline properties, best management practices for lawn care (such as composting, rain barrels and eliminating fertilizers), buffers on agricultural properties and better enforcement of guidelines for sewage systems and stormwater management. Polluted runoff leads to many problems for the health of the waterways that can ultimately hinder recreational uses which, in turn, affect the region's economy and industry.

## INVASIVE SPECIES

Lake Winnebago is a recognized Statewide Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Source Water, and the public has clearly noticed the effects of invasive species in the Winnebago Waterways. Many people specifically reported zebra mussels as a major nuisance when their shells accumulate on shorelines and beaches, though many believe the zebra mussels contribute to improved water clarity. While zebra mussels were most commonly discussed in the feedback forums, the spread of all invasive species was noted as a major issue. Education and outreach are seen by participants as the best way to prevent the spread of existing and introduction of new species, though some felt that providing more resources at boat landings, such as water for cleaning boats, better signage and better enforcement, would be effective.



CREDIT: MindMixer User David B86

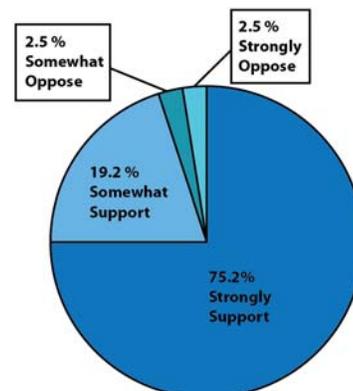
An overwhelming 95% of survey takers support agencies and local municipalities working together to manage the system.

**Many Issues to Consider!** While algae, polluted runoff and invasive species were the three issues that bubbled to the top, the public did raise a broad range of issues, and consistently mentioned issues related to boating and communities. Boating-related issues included a desire for consistent or unified launch permits, safety education, law enforcement, and facilities. Community issues included park amenities, trails connections, more diverse businesses, events and tourism.

**Like the communities that surround the Winnebago Waterways, these issues are interconnected. The solutions are too.** Decades of planning documents have suggested that the waterways system be managed cooperatively. While this recommendation is generally well received, this is the first true effort to get all the right agencies and organizations at the same table to explore the right strategy or structure. Since the best plans and initiatives rely on support from the stakeholders they serve, the Steering Team went straight to that source to determine whether cooperative management is something they want. An overwhelming 95% of survey takers, along with extremely positive feedback at public meetings and the online forum, showed that people support agencies and local municipalities working together to manage the system. People who were hesitant to answer or to fully support this idea noted that they would prefer to know exactly what the management structure looks like before they could vote.

**What happens next?** The Steering Team plans to use the information and input gathered from this public engagement exercise to inform future phases of the project. The Steering Team will continue to work together on next steps, such as:

- **Communicate Consistently with the Public**  
The Steering Team should continue to clearly communicate with the public about project status, any issues currently being addressed, and how they plan to address other priorities. This may require a targeted messaging campaign to inform the public that their input was heard, and that certain issues and solutions are currently being addressed. A campaign name (Weigh in



**Survey question results:** "Would you SUPPORT or OPPOSE more formal collaboration among the existing government agencies for management of the issues affecting the Winnebago System?"

on the Winnebago Waterways) is in place, giving the project initial recognition throughout the five counties, and a communications structure has been built. The Steering Team should review, and revise accordingly, the pathways of communications in place to ensure targeted audiences are included and continue to be reached.

- **Engage Local Municipalities**

The Steering Team should engage with local municipalities immediately. The public is currently engaged and momentum was strong at the time this report was written. The Steering Team has a timely opportunity to research collaboration efforts and to discuss project opportunities with local jurisdictions. Together, these jurisdictions should try to identify redundancies in code, policy or permitting, and areas where waterways management coordination can be enhanced. The results of this study can also help local governments see the areas where they could improve communication, access to information, outreach and education to clarify or correct misperceptions about lake issues and management responsibilities.

- **Engage Community Representatives**

The Steering Team should also begin a planning effort to engage local, private and nonprofit champions on the next project phases. Consider the enthusiasm and participation of the Stakeholder Advisory Team and continue to engage those members and their networks.

- **Define Cooperative Management**

Now that public support for cooperative management has been noted, the Steering Team must define exactly what that means or *could* mean. The Steering Team should research potential management areas approaches that have been used for large, multi-jurisdictional, public resources, and determine how they might apply to the Winnebago Waterways and gauge public support for such options accordingly.

- **Conduct Public Polling About Solutions and Funding Structure**

Public input indicates that most people feel that education, outreach and monitoring activities would be a good starting point for working together. The Steering Team would benefit from additional polling of the public on more specific ways in which to work cooperatively. Further, the Steering Team should also research potential funding sources and structure(s) for implementing cooperative management, then conduct further public polling to determine support for the options.

- **Consider and Respond to Public Opinions and Ideas**

The Steering Team should consider the comments and all of the priorities identified through the public engagement process and conduct an analysis of any issues that are already being addressed, as well as which issues and solutions are less intensive and could be addressed in the immediate or near future. The Steering Team should consider, specifically, researching or developing better coordinated education, outreach and monitoring programs. Such activities would have multiple benefits, including engaging the public in new ways and providing a role for more organizations and individuals. The monitoring activity could also provide more information with which to measure conditions and trends on the lakes. In addition, now that the public has expressed concerns, they will want to hear back from decision-makers about progress. Since some of their identified



To maintain the public engagement momentum of Phase I and respect the public's efforts recent efforts, engagement must be continually promoted through the next phases.

concerns are already being addressed, this is a great opportunity for decision-makers to showcase progress. The Steering Team should determine whether additional data points or public input are needed to be able to address the priority issues. For example, this phase collected information about the addresses and age of participants that could be used to address under-represented communities and groups (e.g. people ages 14-35 make up about one-third of the population in the region, but were only about 12% of the participants).

- **Continue and Strengthen Steering Team and Assign Roles**

The Steering Team should continue to meet at least once per month to keep project momentum going, continue assigning roles and maintain a chart of progress; Biodiversity Project recommends maintaining a neutral facilitator to assist with documentation and keeping the process democratic and transparent. The Steering Team currently consists of 25 members, 19 of whom were consistently active throughout Phase I by attending monthly meetings and conference calls, providing input and feedback, participating in outreach efforts and promoting projects. Biodiversity Project recommends further solidifying the Steering Team going forward, and assigning specific roles to all members to ensure progress is documented and communication is consistent among the team.

- **Develop Communications and Outreach Strategy**

Biodiversity Project recommends that, once next steps for the project are defined, the Steering Team commission appropriate messaging and outreach planning. Transitioning the public message to reflect new progress will be important as project evolves to ensure all stakeholders are appropriately informed along the way.

**Active Steering Team Members**

- **Kim Biedermann:** Winnebago County UW-Extension
- **Chad Casper:** Winnebago County Land & Water Conservation
- **Chad Cook:** Winnebago County UW-Extension
- **Terri Dopp-Paukstat:** Waushara County
- **Eric Fowle:** East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission
- **Erin Gerred:** Fond du Lac County
- **Ted Johnson:** Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
- **Kendall Kamke:** Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
- **Michael Lizotte:** Winnebago Lakes Council
- **Rob McLennan:** Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
- **Craig Moser:** Outagamie County
- **Catherine Neiswender:** Winnebago County UW-Extension
- **Danielle Santry:** Calumet County
- **Diane Schauer:** Calumet County
- **Julie Schmelzer:** Calumet County
- **Jay Shambeau:** Calumet County
- **Sam Tobias:** Fond du Lac County
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- **Todd Verboomen:** East Central Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission