

The COLA Call

By Ed Mutsch

This series of columns was written in 2007. We are keeping these articles because most of them still apply to today's concerns about our lakes.

This Hubbard County COLA (Coalition of Lake Associations) column is the first installment in what will be a regular feature of the Enterprise, appearing in alternate Saturday editions of the paper. And what is COLA, you might ask, and why should I care to read a COLA commentary twice a month? First question first: What is it?

COLA is an organization made up of 30 Hubbard County lake associations encompassing 40 lakes. The total membership of these 30 lake associations numbers a bit more than 2000; that can be viewed within the context of a total Hubbard County lake count of 217 and a population of 18861 (official 2005 estimate). While each lake association was originally constituted to address issues specific to its lake(s), with its own unique mix of social, community service and/or political purposes, it was long ago recognized that there were many concerns that were common to every lake association; thus the 1988 creation of COLA to more effectively address those common concerns. The organization functions through a group made up of four officers together with a Board of Directors to which each lake association member appoints a representative; it is funded through lake association member dues, project-specific donations, and grants.

COLA is principally concerned with the preservation, protection, and improvement of the quality of the county's water and related resources, i.e., the Upper Mississippi watershed and its associated rivers, lakes and wetlands, as well as with the impacts on those resources of the development of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd tier lakeshore property. It develops positions on issues, e.g., shore land

management regulations, shore land restoration or aquatic invasive species, informs and educates its membership on those issues, then implements programs to address particular problems and/or presses government officials at the local and state levels to do so. While many of the specific issues will be treated more expansively in upcoming columns, the interested reader can immediately learn more about COLA activities at its website, www.mnwaters.org/hubbardcola. But now to the second question: Why should you care?

There is a reflexive tendency on the part of some to think that lake and river issues are of very little consequence to anyone other than those who live on them. But a more measured meditation is likely to bring one to a different conclusion. Anyone who uses the lakes and rivers for fishing, boating or other recreational activities will be adversely impacted if overdevelopment, pollution or destructive aquatic invasive species invasion seriously impairs the suitability of those lakes for such activities, whether the user lives on or off one of those lakes or rivers. And while there may be Hubbard County residents who rarely take advantage of our abundant water resources, those individuals nonetheless share in the economic benefits that flow therefrom, some such as tradesmen, realtors, restaurateurs, bars and bait shops directly, all others from the indirect, but no less real, economic ripple effect. And then there is the impact of the valuation of lake and river property on the total "tax capacity" of the county. A number of studies have shown a clear relationship between the water quality of a lake and the value of the associated littoral property. Thus, a severe impairment of Hubbard County water resources would result in a reduced tax capacity, rendering a given level of desired county expenditure more politically problematic than would otherwise be the case, a situation that would impact all county residents in roughly equal measure.

Demographers project that future north central Minnesota population growth will occur at a much greater rate than the growth of the state population as a whole, putting Hubbard County directly in the crosshairs of that future development target. With some of the county's lakes already beginning to experience some level of impairment, it is important that our water resources be improved and protected from additional harm, and that future development occur in an orderly and controlled manner. The involvement of a greater

number of individuals concerned about these issues would go far to achieving such objectives.

Thus, with the recognition that the quality of life and economic benefits that flow from our precious water resources are increasingly under threat, with consequences that impact everyone, a COLA call to arms is going out to any and all Hubbard County citizens willing to help defend against such threats. Come join in a concerted effort to preserve and protect what is arguably our region's most valuable asset.

[The June 9th column will discuss the growing threat of aquatic invasive species (AIS). See the notice of COLA-sponsored AIS workshops on June 15th and 16th elsewhere in this issue.]

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