

CITY MULLS OPTIONS TO 'SAVE CITY LAKE'

Cookeville, Putnam Co., TN

By Tracey Hackett

COOKEVILLE — “I have so many fond memories of summers spent there fishing or frog gigging that it should be called Memory Lake.”



That's how Putnam County resident James Carter describes what Cookeville's City Lake means to him. He's also an organizer of the Save City Lake grassroots organization because, he

says, the lake is dying.

(Pictured: James Carter wades into the muck on the lake bottom to measure its depth.)

This year marks its 70th anniversary. It was dammed in 1946 and became the primary water source for Cookeville until 1972, when the city began getting its water from Center Hill Lake.

But with that change, the city also stopped maintaining the lake, Carter says, and thus began the process of eutrophication.

Scientists, experts in such matters, will say that eutrophication is a natural process in the life cycle of a lake — but human activities can accelerate that process.

And that appears to be what is happening at City Lake, says Carter, who spoke to the Cookeville City Council about the issue this month.

It happens because of nitrogenous pollutants in the body of water. While some of those pollutants occur naturally and impact lakes over a long period of time, others — such as

those in fertilizers and similar compounds — occur in higher concentrations that have a more immediate impact on the lake’s ecosystem. The result is a decline in the fish population, an overgrowth of algae and deepening silt and muck from organic decay on the lake bottom.

Cookeville’s Leisure Services Director Rick Woods said the city is grateful to the organization for bringing attention to the issue.

“Mr. Carter and other members of the Save City Lake organization have called our attention to what they describe as the dying of City Lake. We applaud them for bringing our attention to this issue, and we appreciate their interest and concern,” he said.

Because of the group’s concern for the issue, the city is now exploring possible options for removing the silt and sediment from the lake and properly maintaining the body of water.

“But there are lots of things to consider there, and we have to determine the best approach for fixing the problems,” Woods told the Herald-Citizen.

That involves talking to biology and wildlife and fisheries science professors at Tennessee Tech University, consulting Corps of Engineers, Department of Environment and Conservation and Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency representatives — and that’s just the beginning.

“The life of the lake can be extended by removing the silt and sediment, or the dam can be removed to return the lake to its natural stream. We have to determine which, if either, of those options is the best. Either way, it will be expensive, and other issues will have to be addressed. If the lake is dredged, the issues that caused the problem to begin with, such as storm water management, must also be addressed. If the dam is removed, we must make sure the natural stream habitat is restored and is healthy,” Woods explained.

Therefore, “saving City Lake,” as the grassroots organization is requesting, won’t be either a quick or easy fix.

“This is definitely still in the fact-finding stage of the process, and it will take some time to figure out our options. It’s important that we gather as much information now as we can so that we can make a wise and informed decision about the matter,” Woods said.

Carter said Save City Lake is making a total of four initial requests to the city to restore health to the lake.

Those requests are to:

- Check the fish in the lake to see if there are high levels of contaminants or pollutants present in their flesh;

“Some people will say they’ve eaten fish out of the lake all their lives, and others will say they wouldn’t consider it. We want to see if the fish are healthy to eat,” he said.

- Test the level of contaminants and pollution in the water;

“The lake is fed by Falling Water River, but to my knowledge, the closest testing location to the lake is Pigeon Roost Creek,” Carter said.

- Measure the stratification of the muck on the lake bottom to determine its depth and content;

“If it’s free of contaminants, it can be collected and sold. It can be healthy for the soil and can be sold as an additive in fertilizers,” he said.

- Put in place a comprehensive program to begin getting rid of the silt and sediment.

“A guy fell in three or four months ago and sunk so deep in to the silt and muck at the bottom of the lake that he couldn’t hardly get out,” Carter said.

While he said he appreciates the effort of the city to begin studying the issue, he hopes administrators maintain communication with the organization.

“The city should have had people out there managing the lake for years, or it wouldn’t have gotten in this condition in the first place. It’s an issue that’s been ignored for too long already, and we don’t want it to be ignored any longer. We hope the government will let us know something, and I’d really like for the mayor to sit down and talk with us. So far, that hasn’t happened,” Carter said.

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