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Story: Steven Litt • Photo: Steven Litt • July 29, 2022

Regional Sewer District is smart to focus on planning a well-designed park after removing Horseshoe Lake Dam - Commentary

Aerial photo of Horseshoe Lake in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

SHAKER HEIGHTS, Ohio — There's no peace yet in Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights over the prospect of losing Horseshoe Lake, a beloved scenic amenity that appears to be nearing its end.

Some residents, perhaps many, are still riled up over the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District's controversial decision last year to remove the badly aging, 170-year-old Horseshoe Lake Dam. The agency feared that if the earthen dam had collapsed in heavy rains, the 12-acre Regional Sewer District focuses on planning a well-designed park to follow removal of Horseshoe Lake Dam lake could have sent a wall of water barreling down Doan Brook into Cleveland's University Circle.

The lake has been dry since 2019 when the Ohio Department of Natural Resources ordered it drained to prevent such a disaster, a move that appears to have foreshadowed the permanent loss of the dam and the lake.

The sewer district's opponents haven't stopped trying to save the lake. But peace over Horseshoe Lake's demise, or at least broad acceptance, may come starting in late August when the sewer district launches the eight-month public phase of a "pre-design" planning process aimed at envisioning the future of the 60-acre Horseshoe Lake Park after the dam is removed.

The planning project, which will cost $1.5 million and wrap up in mid-2024 with the completion of designs ready for bidding, is a good move, and a smart one.

Most important is that instead of creating a design team led by civil engineers, the sewer district has chosen the nationally-respected landscape architecture firm of Stimson, based in Cambridge and Princeton, Massachusetts, to head the project.

By emphasizing landscape and aesthetics the sewer district is signaling that it understands and appreciates the historic context in which it's working in Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights. The two inner-ring suburbs of Cleveland are known for their excellent, early 20th-century residential architecture. Shaker Heights is also admired widely as one of America's best-planned garden suburbs.

"This is a first for the sewer district in terms of having a landscape architecture firm as the lead,along with a very strong civil engineering component,'' Kyle Dreyfuss-Wells, the sewer district's CEO, said in an interview with cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer. "We recognized early on that we have a unique project that requires a unique approach.''

The planning process will begin with a virtual public forum on Thursday, Aug. 25 from 6 to 7:30p.m. Sign up details will be available at the project's web page, neorsd.org/doan-brook-restoration-near-horseshoe-lake-park/.

The sewer district will then hold an open house from 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 27,with tents set up across Horseshoe Lake Park, between North Park and South Park boulevards,east of Lee Road in Shaker Heights and Cleveland Heights, which borders the north side of Horseshoe Lake.

Staff members of the district and its design team will be on hand to answer questions and describe the planning process.

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A Good move

The project makes solid sense because it could shift public emotion away from regrets over the loss of a lake to excitement over the potential gain of an even greater park than the one that exists today.

The sewer district is also making it clear that the community doesn't have to live with the weed-filled basin that replaced the lake after it was emptied in 2019. Other, far better possibilities exist. They await definition.

The project will underscore that however big the coming changes might be, they can't fairly be compared to the odious proposal made in the early 1960s by then-Cuyahoga County Engineer Albert Porter. He wanted to ram the elevated Clark Freeway along Lower Lake and through Horseshoe Lake. Porter famously called the area "a two-bit duck pond."

Porter would have been a destroyer had he succeeded. The sewer district is trying to play a constructive, restorative role while spending public money as its policy allows. And district officials say its policies don't allow for spending money on preserving a lake and a failing dam that aren't truly needed.

Certainly, though, it's easy to understand the passions aroused by the loss of Horseshoe Lake.

Removing the dam means losing a once beautiful U-shaped millpond (configured like a horseshoe) that was built in the early 1850s by the North Union Shakers, along with nearby Lower Lake, to serve commerce in a utopian community they called "The Valley of God's Pleasure."

(In contrast to Horseshoe Lake, the sewer district will spend $13.6 million to rebuild the dam at Lower Lake, saying that it provides flood control for 3,500 acres of watershed, as opposed to 1,100 acres at Horseshoe Lake.)

After a series of transactions, the city of Cleveland in 1895 acquired the upper Doan Valley, including the two lakes. It later leased the parkland to Shaker Heights, the community developed by the free-spending Van Sweringen brothers.

The developers capitalized on the lakes as scenic centerpieces for the Georgian, Tudor-Revival,and French Chateau-style mansions they clustered around them, as did developers in Cleveland Heights.

Top: Horseshoe Lake in Shaker Heights after it was drained in 2019. **Bottom:** Lower Lake in Shaker Heights, fall 2020.

Losing Horseshoe Lake means losing an important piece of that history, along with priceless water views and the dam's role as a public living room for dog walkers, birdwatchers, and parents pushing strollers.

Managing an urban stream

In a larger sense, the Horseshoe Lake project is part of the sewer district's ongoing effort to steward Doan Brook, a storied urban stream that descends 609 feet from its culverted headwaters in Shaker Heights to University Circle, Rockefeller Park, and Lake Erie in Cleveland,with a main stem and branches that total 13 miles.

The district has spent more than $195 million on projects in the 12-square-mile watershed over the past 8 years, of which $151.8 million was accounted for by a deep storage tunnel meant to reduce combined sewer overflows into Lake Erie.

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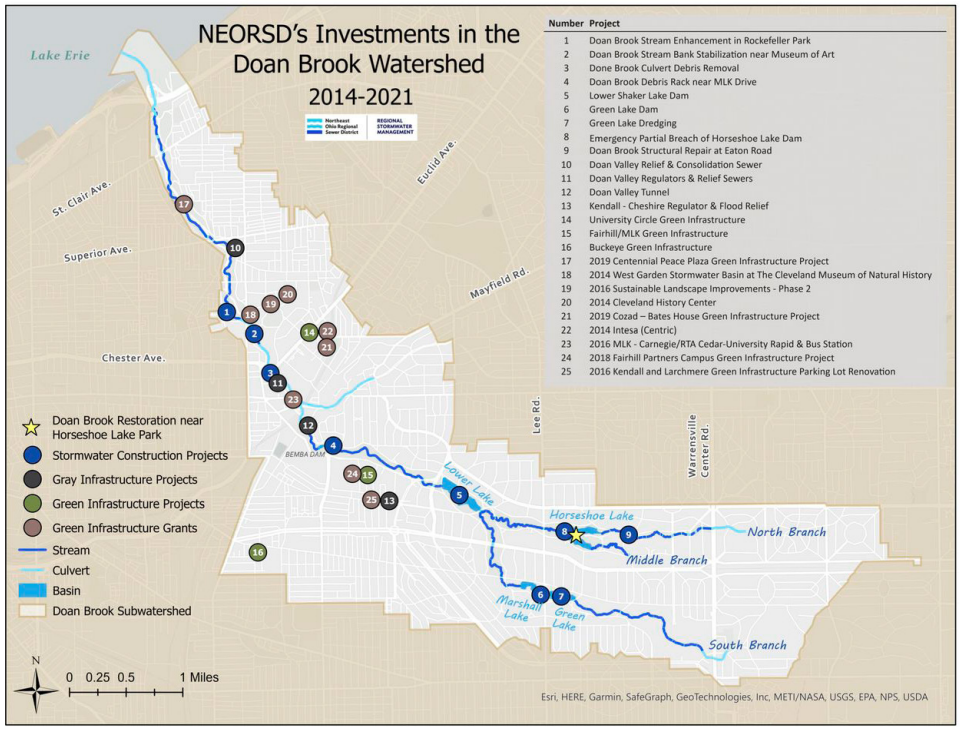

Top: A map documenting Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District projects in the Doan Brook watershed over the past eight years. **Bottom:** Slides from a presentation prepared by the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District and consultants describing the planning process for the future of the Horseshoe Lake park lands after the removal of the Horseshoe Lake Dam.

Horseshoe Lake remains a serious trouble spot within the watershed. Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights, which lease portions of the Horseshoe Lake parkland from the city of Cleveland,hold the permit from ODNR to operate the dam, Dreyfuss-Wells said.

The two suburbs haven't kept pace with dam maintenance and dredging. In recent years, the dam developed cracks and sinkholes that weakened its integrity. And the lake filled with 12 to 15 feet of sediment, leaving it shallow but still capable of bursting the dam in heavy rain, Dreyfuss-Wells said.

After ODNR ordered the lake drained in 2019, Shaker Heights spent $475,000 last year to cut an emergency spillway into the dam to reduce the chance that the structure, which stands 29 feet high at the highest and measures 615 feet long, would fail. The sewer district reimbursed Shaker Heights for the work. Now, after a year in which advocates haven't convinced the district to rebuild the dam and bring back the lake, the agency wants to pivot to the future.

Leading with landscape design

The new planning project is exciting for two main reasons.

One is that the sewer district is inviting the public to imagine what could become an outstanding 21st-century park that blends climate resiliency and landscape restoration with new ways of appreciating human and natural history before, during, and after the Shaker community, which existed from 1822 to 1889.

The second reason for optimism is the district's emphasis on landscape architecture — a profession firmly associated with park planning, established in the U.S. by Frederick Law Olmsted, the co-designer of New York's Central Park.

Landscape architect Matt Langan will lead the design effort for Stimson. His earlier local projects, completed while he worked for the national design firm of Sasaki, included exemplary projects in University Circle: the Nord Family Greenway, finished in 2018, and the Smith Family Gateway, finished in 2020.

Those projects transformed formerly gloomy, overgrown, and neglected landscapes along Doan Brook next to the Cleveland Museum of Art. They indicate the high potential for a new vision upstream at Horseshoe Lake Park.

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Top: New landscaping along the west side of the Cleveland Museum of Art includes an overlook with a panoramic view of anew, 7-acre park space along Doan Brook. Visible in the distance is the golden dome of the Temple-Tifereth Israel, now home to Case Western Reserve University's Maltz Performing Arts Center. **Bottom:** Behind the Horseshoe Lake Dam, masonry structures are flanked by riprap boulders meant to sturdy the weakened earthen dam. **Right:** A thick forest fills the western third of Horseshoe Lake Park in Shaker Heights, downstream from the Horseshoe Lake Dam.

The planning team also includes the Cleveland engineering firm of AECOM; GPD Group of Akron and Enviro Science of Stow; Roy Larick of Euclid, a PhD. archaeologist who leads local hikes on history and geology; RiverReach Construction of Barberton; KS Associates of Elyria, a surveying firm; and the nonprofit Cleveland-based LAND Studio, which aided the design consultant selection process and will assist with public engagement.

Beyond the basics

The sewer district emphasizes that the planning effort is in an information-gathering phase and that design hasn't yet begun.

But Dreyfuss-Wells and other sewer district staff members said that the project will include far more than simply removing the dam and reconfiguring flood plains for the North and Middle branches of Doan Brook, which converge at the Horseshoe Lake site.

The project will include the entire 60-acre Horseshoe Lake parkland, bounded by Lee Road on the west, Park Drive on the east, and North Park and South Park boulevards, which includes the 12-acre lake bottom and an adjacent, 6-acre area with picnic shelters and play facilities.

The property also includes low-visibility areas below the dam that are shrouded with oak, locust,maple, and ash trees, and choked with a thick understory of native and non-native invasive plants including thickets of privet, a popular garden shrub gone wild.

"The 6-acre park that's there today is really a 60-acre park that's not being taken advantage of,''Langan said. "We want to see how the community reacts to that idea."

Dreyfuss-Wells said that the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, established downstream of Horseshoe Lake in 1966 to help block the Clark Freeway, could serve as a precedent in the planning process.

At the Nature Center, the North and South branches of Doan Brook meander across a tree-shaded flood plain laced with trails and converge in a marsh traversed by elevated walkways,observation decks, and a fanciful, Gothic-style wood pavilion.

"We're discovering all kinds of areas along the Middle Branch and the North Branch [of Doan Brook] where we see tremendous opportunity,'' Langan said. "At the Nature Center there are wonderful examples of how you can access the lower level and can change grades and possibly get up into the canopy as well to understand all kinds of levels of ecology."

The district's timeline for dam removal and stream restoration calls for starting heavy work in early 2025 and wrapping up within two years.

The catch is that the district, which plans to spend $14 million at the Horseshoe site, said its policies allow it to use Regional Stormwater Management Program money, which it collects through fees, to pay only for dam removal and stream restoration.

Additional amenities would have to be separately funded, perhaps through philanthropy, and perhaps through a new nonprofit organization, such as the one that oversees the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes.

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Opposition persists

As the new planning effort gets underway, the future of Horseshoe Lake Dam remains a contentious issue.

The city councils in Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights voted last year to approve the district's plans to remove the Horseshoe dam and rebuild the Lower Lake Dam, a project that it says is qualified for funding with Regional Stormwater Management Program money.

The Nature Center at Shaker Lakes, the Shaker Historical Society, and the Doan Brook Watershed Partnership, which supports education, conservation, and public engagement, are also in favor.

But members of the Cleveland Heights Historical Society stand opposed, as do the Friends of Horseshoe Lake, a group of nearly 200 homeowners who have hired Civil engineer Shawn McGee of Cleveland-based TRC Companies, Inc., to propose alternatives to the dam removal.

The Friends group has held protests, dispersed blue Save Horseshoe Lake yard signs, and hired Cleveland lawyer Anthony Coyne, an expert in real estate and planning law, to represent it in meetings with local officials.

Coyne and members of the Friends group have raised questions over the district's views on the science of flood control, historic preservation, public policy, administrative process, and other aspects of the district's decision on the Horseshoe Lake Dam.

When asked whether the Friends group would sue to halt the dam removal, Coyne said he wouldn't speculate.

But he said: "There's a sense of this being something that needs to have a fresh set of eyes on it."

Dreyfuss-Wells, for her part, pointed to official correspondence in which the district rebutted McGee's proposals point-by-point and said the agency is moving ahead.

"In terms of legal action, there's always a potential, but it's not something we're particularly fixated on,'' she said.

A glimpse of the future

At the behest of the Shaker Historical Society, Roy Larick, the archaeologist who joined the sewer district's planning team, led a public tour of Horseshoe Lake's geology and flora on Saturday, July 23.

For two hours, he led roughly 25 participants on a walk past the dam's emergency spillway, a wide channel lined with riprap boulders, and into the forest downhill to the west.

Deep in the woods, he pointed out the steep-walled earthen berm that separated the meandering Doan Brook from the straight channel of the onetime millrace that conveyed water from the lake to a paddle wheel that once powered a Shaker woolen mill near Lee Road.

Larick told the group that he was part of the sewer district's design team and that he was in favor of removing the dam, but his listeners seemed more interested in learning about the surrounding landscape than in signaling opposition.

As the tour wound down, Larick said he felt encouraged about the area's future. He called the Horseshoe Lake park lands an under used resource awaiting a rediscovery, with the help of the sewer district's design team.

"The hope is that the momentum shifts from the negative now to people actually trying to see anew space,'' he said. "The current perception may start to fade into memory as new possibilities come into perception. That's a tough job, but I think this team can do it."

Top: Roy Larick, gesturing, led a nature hike at Horseshoe Lake Park in Shaker Heights, on Saturday. **Middle:** A Gothic-style pavilion provides shelter on an elevated walkway at the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes. **Bottom:** Those hoping to save Horseshoe Lake have let their opinions be known with yard signs.

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