

Respecting our Lake

Full version of letter sent to Council on March 9, 2021

First of all, I fully agree with Blue Massawippi's reaction to the draft version of the Strategic Plan. The lake receives only scant attention in this preliminary version, although everybody appears to recognize this beautiful body of water as one of North Hatley's greatest assets. It is simply taken for granted in the draft copy, as is the upper stretch of the river, which I include when referring to the lake. Without strong measures from each of the five municipalities around the lake, the quality of OUR lake for drinking use, as well as swimming and general enjoyment is at high risk of deteriorating.

I was therefore glad to learn that at their March 1st meeting, Council acknowledged this important omission in the proposed plan and decided to postpone its adoption. Hopefully, the final version will at least identify many of the important problems threatening the lake and set out steps to counter at least some of them.

The municipality already has the tools to tackle certain threats, but does not use them. The Village needs to do more to publicize and enforce by-laws that are in place, such as:

- Use of herbicides, pesticides and most chemical fertilizers
These are prohibited in North Hatley, with the exception of some organic pest control products, while fertilizers are limited to N-P-K levels of 5-5-5 which most slow-release natural fertilizers respect.
- Shoreline vegetation rules
The requirement to maintain a band of natural vegetation at least 5 m wide ... which explicitly forbids maintaining lawns down to the water's edge.

Non-respect of these rules exacerbates cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) problems. While agricultural practices have been an important part of this problem, farmers are now required to take various measures to reduce harmful run-off. It is also worth remembering that, due to the costs involved, home gardeners are more prone than farmers to excessive use of products which pollute the lake and promote algae blooms.

The vegetative buffer zone along the lake shore, required by law, provides several important benefits: among others, an ideal habitat for various land and water life and a barrier against harmful run-off reaching the lake. Both Lobadanaki Park (managed by Blue Massawippi), next to the municipal wharf, and Riverside Park offer good examples of environmentally correct shoreline treatment.

Streams entering the lake from the golf course should be regularly tested for harmful run-off (herbicides, excess phosphorus etc). The two municipalities concerned, North Hatley and the Canton, should discuss control and reduction measures with the golf club. Effective options include growing reed beds in and around ponds to take up much of the phosphate load that would otherwise end up in the lake.

Other streams, besides those from the golf course, also empty into the lake in North Hatley. Each one should be studied and appropriate measures taken to control erosion and other forms of potential pollution. One which comes to mind is the unnamed stream crossing Main Street just south of rue Gagnon. I'll call it Ruisseau Gagnon for now. It runs down from the wooded area south of the Rublee Circle, a zone that is likely to see residential development in the next few years. Protection of this stream and the corridor through which it runs should be given priority in the strategic plan, as a part of lake protection measures. A future developer could be required to set aside a green linear space centered on the stream for park use.

Ruisseau Gagnon then runs through a scenic wooded valley, almost a gorge in places, on its way to the lake. Large-scale backfills, made in the past, threaten the stream in a few places; erosion problems need to be addressed and any further harmful activities in this valuable eco-system prevented. The Strategic Plan could envisage an eventual green corridor running the length of the stream, with a public walking trail from Rublee down to Gagnon. Trail-building expertise might be sought from the Massawippi Conservation Trust to ensure optimal norms and user enjoyment.

Salt run-off from roads in winter is another important threat to the lake's fragile ecosystem. Currently 3-400 metric tons are spread annually by the Village on local roads, excluding Route 108. A major part of this salt ends up in the

lake. Significant reduction of salt use could be made in various ways. Flatter areas require less or no salt, drivers need to adapt to roads that have been simply plowed (no abrasives or salt), except on steeper streets. Discussion should be opened with Transports Québec to treat 2 to 3 km of Route 108 (Capelton and Magog Roads) as an “écotoroute”, just as they have done elsewhere in Québec in ecologically sensitive zones.

The future of the concrete retaining wall along the lakeside of Dreamland Park will soon have to be addressed. Some parts of this long 60 year-old wall are seriously degraded. Decisions will soon have to be taken on its replacement. Alternative options to the wall will need to be evaluated. As the wall contravenes current shoreline treatment rules, Québec’s Environment Ministry has clearly indicated its wish for removal of the wall and restoring of a beach. Returning to a natural beach (with appropriate vegetation) would be far more environmentally-friendly, as well as being a more economical solution.

The whole issue of motor boats and their impact on the lake needs to be carefully evaluated and steps taken to address various problems. Helped by a subsidy from Ottawa, Blue Massawippi is currently completing a study titled “*Intelligent boating*”. Motor boats operating in shallow areas can provoke algae proliferation, by stirring up sediments, and vigorous regrowth of weeds by chopping them with their propellers. Sensitive areas need to be mapped and protected.

There are times where there are simply too many boats on the lake. Blue Massawippi is seeking to determine the maximum desirable level of boat traffic on the lake (its environmental capacity) and to put in place certain controls, in collaboration with Transport Canada. This is especially important when planning for population growth around or close to the lake which is likely to lead to increased boating demand. Negative impacts include water pollution, harmful wave action, noise, physical danger of high-speed boats versus softer users ... sailboats, kayaks, canoes, etc ... and of course swimmers. Hopefully, conclusions of the Blue Massawippi project will help the *Régie intermunicipale du parc régional Massawippi* (formed by the five municipalities around the lake) to implement measures aimed at reducing the environmental impacts of boat traffic and promoting better cohabitation practices for all users of the lake.

Zebra mussels also pose a major threat. They have not yet been detected in our lake, but with so many surrounding bodies of water already infested, this is an explosion waiting to happen, according to Michèle Gérin of Blue Massawippi. Whereas 4500 boats were washed in Ayer’s Cliff last year before launching, less than 1000 boat-owners paid to be washed in North Hatley. This disparity and apparent laxity are a major cause for concern, which must be addressed by our Council. Even light craft such as kayaks and paddle boards are potential culprits.

The *Régie intermunicipale du parc régional Massawippi* will need to work closely with Blue Massawippi and give its recommendations the attention they deserve. It is clear that concerted efforts will be required by the five municipalities around the lake, to implement any real controls aimed at protecting and improving its health. In the meantime, I very much hope that North Hatley seizes the opportunity in its strategic plan to set out a road-map for protecting the lake. By setting goals and suggesting means of achieving them, the Village would be setting a meaningful precedent which the four other lakeside municipalities might well be inspired to follow.

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