

Dredging delays Upper Echo Lake opening

\$3.5 million project in Union County park began work in 2006

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It was hoped ducks, fish and other wildlife could return to their home on Upper Echo Lake, which straddles Mountainside and Westfield, by early this year. But unforeseen expenses delayed a massive dredging project, and now it looks like the waterway will not be ready until late fall.

Officials expected it would cost \$2.5 million back in 2006 to improve conditions at the 9.6 acre lake located in Union County's Echo Lake Park, but the job proved to be larger than anticipated. Costs rose up to \$3.5 million, according to Sebastian D'Elia, county communications director.

The situation forced the county to delay progress on the dredging until additional funds could be arranged, according to county officials, who said funding for the work is being provided by the state Department of Environmental Protection and the Union County Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund.

"What happened was that we saw the volume of dredge material was more than we had anticipated, so we needed more funding," said Thomas O. Mineo, county engineer.

Progress on the project was delayed for about a year, but ultimately a total of about 40,000 cubic tons of muck will be scraped from the lake bed and trucked to several sites for disposal.

The accumulation of silt at the lake bottom is something that is hard to avoid and is just the result of nature's cycle, authorities said.

Mineo said that as water flows along a stream feeding the lake, suspended solids from eroding shore banks become caught up in the rapid flow downstream, but when the velocity of the water slows down as it reaches the lake, the solids drop out of the flow and float to the bottom.

The accumulation of silt had been so great that small islands of muck had poked through the surface of the lake, most noticeably between the boathouse and the Route 22 side of the lake.

The lake was drained of water in October 2006, according to Daniel J. Bernier of the county's Division of Park Planning and Maintenance.

A contractor was brought in to use an electronic stun process to collect and remove several thousand fish living in the waterway.

Bernier said the fish were sorted by species and some were released downstream on the Rahway River while others were turned loose in Lake Surprise in the county's Watchung Reservation.

"On the plus side, having the lake empty as long as it was allowed the lake bed to dry out and as a result, enabled the contractor to give us a better price on the removal of the sediment because now he is hauling dry material instead of wet," Bernier said.

He said this has saved the county an estimated \$1 million in removal costs.

Providing funds for the periodic dredging of the Upper Echo Lake and other lakes in the county's park system has become necessary to maintain their health and aesthetic appearance, officials said.

"The reality is that like anything else, lakes have to be maintained because, over the years, sediment runs into those lakes and they have to be cleaned out," said Freeholder Chairman Angel Estrada in explaining the county's decision to provide the additional money for the work.

"Sediment has to be removed to maintain the ecological balance of the lake. Unfortunately the process of removing the silt takes time because the process is not that simple," Estrada said.

"Right now we are removing the dredge material. It's a process that will take us up to the summer," Mineo said.

The work is being done behind a stretch of chain link fence running the length of the lakeside along the single two lane roadway that winds through the park.

He said the dredged material "will all be stockpiled on the side of the lake, where it will be prepared to be taken it to a facility for disposal off site within the next two weeks."

Bernier said that once the dredging is complete, the lake bed will be re-graded and the lake re-filled with 10.9 million gallons of water to a depth of four feet.

Once the lake is re-filled, scheduled for the summer, a massive re-planting program will begin, Bernier said.

"Some of the plantings will be aquatic, meaning they will be planted directly in the water, and others will be planted on the lawn surrounding the lake," he said.

County officials see the project being completed by late fall.

However, D'Elia pointed out that Echo Lake Park remains open and will still be used as a site for ongoing recreational programs and activities.

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