

WHAT IS A LAKE DISTRICT?

The details of the laws governing lake districts can be found in Chapter 33 of the Wisconsin State Statutes and are encapsulated in the Guide to Wisconsin's Lake Management Law. The following are abbreviated highlights:

WHAT IS A DISTRICT?

A lake district is a special purpose unit of government. The first districts came into existence in 1974 with the passing of Chapter 33 of the Wisconsin State Statutes. There are approximately 100 lake districts in Wisconsin today.

WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

The purpose of a district is to maintain, protect, and improve the quality of a lake and its watershed for the mutual good of the members and the lake environment.

HOW IS IT FORMED?

A lake district can be formed in one of four ways:

- by 51% of the landowners in the proposed district petitioning the county or town board;
- by owners of 51% of the land in the proposed district petitioning the county or town board;
- by resolution of a village board or city council; or
- by conversion of a town sanitary district.

WHO IS INCLUDED?

The boundaries usually include the property of all riparian owners and can include off-lake property that benefits from the lake or affects the lake's watershed. The district may include all or part of a lake or more than one lake. A city or village must give its approval to be included in a district.

HOW IS IT RUN?

Within a lake district, all property owners share in the cost of management activities undertaken by the district. A lake district is a true example of participatory democracy. Residents who live in the district and are eligible voters and all property owners have a vote in the affairs of the district. This is accomplished at an annual meeting which must be held between May 22 and September 8 each year.

Major decisions of annual meetings can include:

- election of commissioners;
- approval of budgets; and
- approval of contracts or projects costing over \$10,000.

HOW IS A LAKE DISTRICT FINANCED?

Property owners living within the boundaries of a lake district are required by law to pay the fees. The amount of those fees is voted on by the members at the annual meeting. This fee is usually a part of your property tax bill and may come in the form of a mill levy (it can be no more than 2.5 mill and is often much less—some districts have no fees of any sort), a special assessment, or user charge. Borrowing or grant programs can also be used to raise money if approved at the annual meeting.

WHAT CAN A DISTRICT DO?

- Make contracts, purchase or sell land, disburse money, take out loans, accept grants, sue and be sued.
- Develop and carry out surveys or studies, manage aquatic plants, aeration, control erosion, dredge, control dams, and monitor water quality.
- A town, village or city may delegate to the district the authority to adopt lake use regulations. These may include regulations of boating equipment, use or operation; aircraft; and travel on ice-bound lakes.

Permits are needed from the DNR for some of these operations. The district has no authority to control land use.

WHO RUNS IT?

Normally, a lake district's day-to-day activities are carried out by a board of from 5 to 7 commissioners. One is appointed by the county and one by the town. The remaining commissioners are elected by the membership. One elected commissioner must be a resident unless no resident is willing to serve, and the others must be either residents or property owners in the district. *An exception to this convention could be if the district was formed by the resolution of a town or village board or city council. Then the governing body itself serves as the board of commissioners.* At all times, the powers of the commissioners are subject to the decisions of the membership at the annual meeting. The commissioners must meet quarterly, and open meeting laws apply.

Commissioners can:

- manage fiscal matters;
- maintain working relations and cooperation with government and agency officials;
- develop plans, goals, research and surveys for the protection and rehabilitation of the lake.

CAN THE DISTRICT BE DISSOLVED?

An existing district may be dissolved by a 2/3 vote of the members at an annual meeting.



For more information, contact the UWEX-Lakes Partnership, College of Natural Resources at UW-Stevens Point, WI 54481 [715-346-2116], your county Cooperative Extension Office or DNR District Lake Coordinator.