

## **“Our Lakefront as an Economic Development Engine” “Challenges and Opportunities”**

### **A Report Offered to the Village of Winthrop Harbor Mayor and Board of Trustees September 2009**

Winthrop Harbor has a great gift and asset as a lakefront community in the North Point Marina Waterfront Complex. As a municipality, we need to be our own advocate, to help the State see the benefits to the state and our municipality of developing and drawing people to the lakefront. Our lakefront is not being used to its full potential. It would be in the village's own best interest to find a way to get the state involved in completing the original master development plan for the marina. This plan was drafted with the promise (either explicit or implied) of economic prosperity for our community and the surrounding areas. An aggressive plan should be drafted to get our State Senator and Representative involved in encouraging the state to fulfill the promise and complete the original development plan that included a hotel/resort, shops and more restaurants; all necessary to market the lakefront as both a boater, and non-boater, destination.

We have the largest freshwater marina in the United States and access to the most visited state park in Illinois, bringing over 2.8 million visitors to the area every year. When we look to the west, our limitations to economic development are due to the distance from the interstate and municipal boundaries, but to the east we have a great opportunity to develop a thriving tourism market on Lake Michigan.

Part of the way we may be able to improve our economic development opportunity is through the implementation of the Triangle and Streetscape projects which will create a nautically themed entrance point to our lakefront. But there is so much more we can do to truly embrace being a lakefront community. Below are a few of the lakefront development obstacles discussed at a recent meeting between representatives of the EDC and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources:

- Failure to dredge the North Beach has a result of seagulls taking over. The high seagull population has resulted in ecoli levels 10 times the safe limit. The north beach has been publically announced in the news for several years as the worst beach in Illinois. How can we work with the State to get this problem solved so our beach can be enjoyed by our residents and visitors?
- The main road to the North Beach requires navigating past Skipper Buds. This requires crossing past a chain link gate with a keypad (only used in the winter) that has hours posted stating when the area is open. A chain link gate does not scream “Welcome” to residents and visitors the way we would want our municipality to “Welcome” everyone. Is there another way for guest/residents to arrive at the North Beach? Or is there a way to make this entrance more inviting to guests?

- Flooding of the Spring Bluff Forest Preserve has created a swamp, rather than the prairie that once stood there. This creates an eyesore, at a minimum, and increases the health risk, such as West Nile Virus. How do we get the Lake County Forest Preserve to make this forest preserve a recreational area like other forest preserves throughout Lake County? Our residents shouldn't have to travel to distant forest preserves to enjoy nature when we have a forest preserve right in our own municipality. How do we get some nature trails to hike and other natural assets to enjoy in this forest preserve?
- Lake County and the State have failed to maintain Spring Bluff Road as an additional access point to the North Beach. How do we convince the Lake County Forest Preserve that Winthrop Harbor deserves the time and effort put into this forest preserve like they have done in other county forest preserves?
- Parcels designated for a hotel/retail and a fine dining restaurant remain undeveloped 20 years after the marina was built. The DNR has indicated that these parcels remain developable, but have not provided clear instruction on the process. The DNR Director of Realty & Environmental Planning has gone as far as to express the unlikelihood of their continued support for a resort, indicating that its completion would compete too much with Illinois Beach Resort. How do we get the DNR and the State itself to complete the plan that was approved when we basically gave the State our lakefront? Who do we contact? What actions do we need take to get this accomplished?
- Due to erosion to an area possibly containing asbestos material, the South Beach has become a DNR designated "feeder beach" to prevent erosion on our bluff and to feed sand to beaches to the south. The top section of this beach has been fenced off with signs posted that trespassers may be arrested. The beach can be accessed by an unmaintained and unmarked side trail, but beach visitors must stay south of an existing creek, making it that much more difficult to access the area. This again gives the impression that Winthrop Harbor residents are not welcome and can not enjoy our own lakefront. How do we gain access to a beach area that once was ours without causing hardship to the state?

Even with the above mentioned obstacles, there are things within our control that we can begin doing as a village:

- Embrace an identity as a lakefront community. If we believe that the future economic prosperity of our Village is linked to the tourism market generated by our lakefront, every decision we make regarding the entrance to our lakefront should have this in mind.
- Leverage the lakefront for recreation and events. The DNR has embraced the idea of the Village or outside event planners utilizing the south bluff, fishing pier, north beach, volleyball courts, basketball court, and hotel parcel for events or activities. The recreation board and department are best suited to coordinate and promote these, but opportunities for things like volleyball leagues, movie nights, an ice rink, and trail runs just start to scratch the surface of the lakefronts potential, while also driving traffic to local

businesses. The opportunities are there; now the chance to make this happen is up to the village.

- Promote lakefront activities with the schools—there are youth sailing programs, unique plant and animal species, history, and adventure available for our students to learn about and personally experience.

We stand in the midst of an economic downturn unlike most of us have experienced in our lifetime. We must use this time to position ourselves towards success when the economy turns around. The best way to do that is to unite on a vision of lakefront development and recreation, and to make sure our State Officials know where we stand and what we need.

**Respectfully Submitted:**

**Village of Winthrop Harbor  
Economic Development Commission  
Margo Nelson, Chairperson**