Erie County Legislator Patrick B. Burke
7th District - Cheektowaga, South Buffalo, Sloan and Kaisertown

Review of the Public Discussion on the Status of Lake Erie Water Quality

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Attendees

Buffalo State College
Fred Floss Chair of the Economics Department & Senior Fellow at the Fiscal Policy Institute

Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper
Jill Jedlicka Executive Director and Riverkeeper
Kerrie Gallo Director of Ecological Programs

Alliance for the Great Lakes
Nate Drag Watershed Project Coordinator

Erie County Department of Health
Dolores Funke Director of Environmental Health

Erie County Department of Environment and Planning
Thomas Hersey Deputy Commissioner

Erie County Division Sewerage Management
Joe Fiegl Division of Sewerage Management

Citizens Campaign for the Environment
Brian Smith Executive Director

Introduction

On September 14th Erie County Legislator Patrick Burke chaired a public discussion on the status of Lake Erie's water quality. The purpose of this discussion was to determine the most pressing matters facing our local watershed and how we can address these concerns in an expedited manner. It is crucial to analyze this matter from an environmental, economic and public health perspective.

Executive summary

Erie County is facing a slew of challenges when it comes to water quality and its improvement. There are a variety of factors that impact the health and safety of our local watersheds. Sewers, septic systems, storm water and agricultural runoff have been identified as major sources of water contamination. This has manifested most notably in the closure of beaches during the summer and a perceptible uncleanliness in local waterways such as Scajaquada Creek.

Investment in sewer systems and sewer management are costly but crucial to improving water quality. As long term "grey" infrastructure plans are being finalized in an effort to combat sewer, septic and storm overflows, a secondary plan should be developed for immediate impact. Green infrastructure should be utilized as a relatively low cost solution that can be implemented now and have a dramatic and speedy effect on water quality. It's crucial that we as a county address both point source and non-point source pollution in order to improve the water quality of Erie County.

There is no single solution but there are many ways to bring about change and begin the implementation of more effective planning practices. If we unify the stakeholders not only from the governmental side, but also non-profits, and community stakeholders, we can create a cohesive regional plan that allows us to develop a clear strategy for our 'blue economy' here in Western New York.

The Blue Economy has potential to be the largest economic development driver in the region. A Brookings Institute study outlined a Great Lakes region financial boom in the hundred billion dollar range after the cost of clean-up, if the Great Lakes were appropriately remediated.

A concept echoed throughout the entire discussion is the need for regional, unified planning that integrates the environment, the economy and the population. A planning committee needs to be established to address and prioritize the issues faced by our local watersheds, investing in our region's water related infrastructure and its management, is an investment in our community

Actionable items

From this discussion we derived several actionable items that our office will be undertaking in the coming weeks:

-Unify the remaining independent municipal sewers under the umbrella of Erie County Sewers in order to improve the efficiency and efficacy of regional waste management

-Address the State Department of Transportation runoff on route 179 near Woodlawn beach, which has been shown to be a major source of bacteria in the area.

Lake Erie Water Quality Agenda

Status of Water Quality

- What are the main factors negatively impacting water quality in Lake Erie and the surrounding waterways?
  - Combined sewer overflows
    - Why have we made such little progress when overflows have been a topic of discussion for so long?
    - Have the State and Federal government appropriately supported repairs to the region's sewer systems?
    - Can local governments be offered any assistance to update sewer systems?
    - The Buffalo Sewer Authority has a long-term control plan that will be carried out over 20 years. Will this plan solve Buffalo's CSO problem?
    - Are resources available to expedite the Buffalo Sewer Authority's CSO problem?
  - Farm runoff
    - How is chemical runoff from farms impacting local waterways
  - What other steps can be taken to remediate contaminants in our fresh water?

Quality of Life

- Beaches in Erie County have been closed nearly half of the year can you explain why this is happening? If there are different circumstances for each closing can you weigh in on each briefly?
  1. Bennett Beach
  2. Green Lake Beach
  3. Lake Erie Beach
  4. Evangola State
  5. Evans Town Park Beach
  6. Hamburg Bathing Beach
  7. Beaver Island
  8. Woodlawn Beach

- Why aren't there bathing beaches in the City of Buffalo?

Lake Erie Economy

- What is the economic impact of Lake Erie on our local economy?
- What is the projected economic growth of our local economy due to Lake Erie?
- Does poor water quality have any impact on our local economy?
- Has the algae bloom in Toledo Ohio had a negative impact on their economy?
- Is there any chance of the algae bloom reaching the eastern shore of Lake Erie?

Summary of Statements

The following are a summary of statements made by the attendees

Buffalo State College
Fred Floss
Chair of Buffalo State College Economics Department and Fiscal Policy Institute Fellow

Here in Erie County the relationship between clean water and public policy needs to be evaluated, strategic and economic development for the region must take into account Great Lakes' water quality and its impact on economic growth.

In order to be successful the county must take a comprehensive approach which works on all areas of pollution abatement such as; river runoff from upstream sources, infrastructure repair, sprawl and the implications for pollution and pollution control, ecosystem restoration and improving multi-state conventions.

The threat of water scarcity by 2025 makes the Great Lakes water critically important, the EPA and the Brookings Institute have found that the benefits outweigh the cost of cleanup. Erie County should take steps to improve water quality by establishing regional programs to clean water coming from rivers, creeks, and streams, clean up Brownfield sites that have potential for leaching pollution, extend the Olmstead Park system in underdeveloped areas to reduce runoff, improve sewer and storm water infrastructure to reduce the negative impacts of overflows, review policies on sprawl and economic development to add policies and regulations which will have a positive effect on clean water.

Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper:
Jill Jedlicka
Executive Director and Riverkeeper of Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper

Economy and ecology are not mutually exclusive and the Buffalo waterfront is an example of this. We are aware of the problems and we know the solution, but we have not prioritized the ecological side of things.

Our water resources need to be viewed as more than just a commodity for the local economy, but rather a catalytic investment, and that begins with developing a strategic framework for our blue economy. To develop a regional strategic plan there needs to be a cohesive dialogue, as well as integrated multi-sector engagement.

Water is a core component in our community, economically and recreationally, and we must treat it as such. Our water management systems are just as important and require the same monetary investment as our roads, bridges and highways. We have to invest in new systems but also in repairing the old ones, including address non-point solutions

To conclude a holistic approach to water quality and system management is vital for improvement, before a shovel goes in the ground, and every step of the way after that we need to address how this industry or development with impact our watershed.

Kerrie Gallo
Director of Ecological Programs

We need to approach water quality on a watershed basis and we have to be prepared to use every tool in our toolbox. It's necessary that we create better policy and codes pertaining to water quality. There must also be a greater investment in funding so we can establish a baseline and there prioritize our issues to develop the trajectory for the future of the watershed.

Alliance for the Great Lakes

Nate Drag Watershed
Project Coordinator

Addressing water quality must be a regional issue, all the communities along the Great Lakes are facing similar issues and problems, and working collaboratively in the region is the most effective way to work on this problem.

The issues surrounding Lake Erie water quality are more complex than just when the beaches are closed. We need to invest in testing to evaluate where we are and what our priorities should be. Increasing research will help to address the non-point sources of pollution that we are dealing with.

Another crucial investment should be education, as well as policy changes, such as changing codes to mandate more impervious green space to improve rainwater absorption. We have to look at what has worked for other communities facing similar issues and employ successful cohesive solutions.

The Erie County Health Department

Dolores Funke
Associate Public Health Engineer and Director of Environmental Health

There is no quick fix to the issues facing our water here in Erie County. In recent years there has been increased investment from the EPA through the Great Lakes Initiative, with that we inspected streams that emptied into bathing beaches and found numerous storm water outlets that were emptying into creeks contributing to the high levels of bacteria. Research like this must be continued for us to be able to prioritize and create a regional plan.

Money is the biggest impediment to addressing water quality; we don't invest in our water and waste management infrastructure like we do with our roads and highways. There has to be a coordinated spending effort, as well as a prioritization plan that meets regularly and gets things done.

Erie County Department of Environment and Planning

Thomas Hersey
Deputy Commissioner

Watershed planning is crucial issues especially when it comes to local land use it is and it when it falls under the purview of multiple municipalities and servicers. Each municipality needs to understand their role in reducing and their contributions to the watershed.
The reinvigorated and expanded Healthy Niagara Watershed program is a great example of the things we should be doing with our money.
The county has limited resources and we have to identify our priorities and invest money in more analysis, moving upstream, to identify sources of bacteria.

The Erie County Division of Sewerage Management

Joseph L. Fiegl
Deputy Commissioner

In the past fifteen years the county has taken over the servicing of 13 municipalities, these mergers have had much success. The previous setup was disjointed with numerous departments involved. These municipalities have their own collection systems separate from the County and the Buffalo Sewers. These departments do not only deal with sewers, they are often DPW's who deal with a variety of issues including roads, plowing, and sewers, where as in Erie County, all our department does is sewers. It is crucial that we have an integrated planning approach and that we make these key improvements to our municipal infrastructure.

Proper analysis is necessary to find out where issues are coming from, in order to determine the next steps and what issues must be prioritized. A 2010 study done by the New York State Parks Department noted five sources of contamination at the Woodlawn Beach site. The contamination at that site is not solely due to the adjacent wastewater facility.

Citizens Campaign for the Environment

Brian Smith
Executive Director

If we do not take action the damage that we cause to the watershed may be irreparable. There is no single solution; we need help from state and federal level to upgrade our sewage infrastructure. Unfortunately sewers are not part of the conversation about infrastructure, which they need to be because they are a vital to the advancement of our community. This year the state expects another 1.5 billion dollars in settlement funds and it should go to improving infrastructure.

Testimony On Lake Erie Water Quality

By Frederick G. Floss
Professor and Chair Department Of Economics And Finance SUNY Buffalo State
Senior Fellow at the Fiscal Policy Institute

Great Lakes water is an important topic in any discussion of any strategic or economic development plan for Erie County. How and if these resources are protected will have important implications on the future direction of economic growth for the county. Should the resources be used to produce the most dollars of development and employment without regards to the level of pollution and degradation of the Great Lakes, or should the costs of pollution be taken into account when making decisions?

How one determines which benefits and costs are counted can easily change whether it is economically viable to clean up the lakes. Policy makers need to understand the assumptions underlying any study. For example, the amount of rain per year going forward will have a big impact on the amount of runoff that will enter the lake and therefore the benefits and costs of mitigating runoff. Different experts can disagree on this point while agreeing on the rest of the analysis. These problems are further exasperated by the self-interest of different groups within the community.

The problem of pollution whether in the Great Lakes or anywhere else is made more difficult because the market system breaks down. There is no price for pollution and the ability to produce at zero costs leads to levels of pollution which are higher than socially optimum. Without government intervention and regulations some will be able to inflict pollution on the rest of society – shifting the costs on to those who would like clean beaches and safe drinking water. Economists call these costs externalities and there is a large literature on these issues.

The County cannot get around making decisions about how to proceed. Either they give the property rights to individuals and business which allow them continue to produce pollution, or give the rights to those who are suffering from the pollution. In some cases this can be a difficult decision, reducing pollution may mean that jobs and profits may be lost in the short run. But if pollution continues, it may mean: either more jobs or profits are lost over time because no one will live in a toxic environment.

Pollution and the Great Lakes

Eire County has a difficult problem in cleaning up its waterfront in that much of the pollution is initiated outside of the county. The pollution put into the lake in Toledo impacts the water quality in Buffalo. This does not mean the County should not implement a clean water policy but that it needs to work in conjunction with other consortiums, governments and community groups if they are to be successful.

It does no good to clean up the waterfront, if the rivers continue to dump pollution into the lake because next year the waterfront will be just as dirty. It does no good to improve infrastructure and storm sewers in the County if the brownfields along the water leech chemicals into the water. If the County is to be successful it must take a comprehensive approach, which works, on all areas of pollution abatement.

If a holistic approach is taken, then the county must create policies and legislation, which address:

- Pollution Abatement of existing pollution in Lake Erie
- River runoff from upstream sources such as agriculture, manufacturing and communities.
- Infrastructure repair and replacement
- Sprawl and its implications for pollution and pollution control
- Ecosystem restoration
- Improving multi-state conventions and compacts

Cost-Benefit Studies of the Great Lakes

Both the EPA and the Brookings Institute have done a number of cost-benefit studies on cleaning up Great Lakes water and using a number of different methods have found that the benefits far outweigh the cost of the cleanups. Austin, "Leveraging the Great Lakes Region's Assets for Economic Growth," Brookings Institute Metropolitan Policy Program Report (2010) find the cleanup would produce 2.7 million additional jobs worth $150 billion in compensation. Brookings further estimates, that between 2.8 and 5.1 billion people worldwide will face scare water by 2025 making Great Lakes water critically important.

The net benefits for Buffalo in their estimates are between $600 million and $1.1 billion. To better understand how cost-benefit work go to: http://water.epa.gov/infrastructure/greeninfrastructure/gi_costbenefits.cfm .

Recommendations

The County needs to recognize that while it must work with others municipalities and governments to get the best results there are still a number of initiatives they can take on their own which will improve the quality of Lake Erie water and over time the economic benefits from having clean water.

- Create a program to clean up water coming from rivers, creeks and streams which flow into the lake.
- Clean up additional brownfield sites which boarder the lake and have the potential a leaching pollution.

- Extend the Olmsted park system in under-developed areas to act as catchment pools to reduce runoff. Additional planting of trees and plants will not only improve water retention but can beautify under-developed areas.
- Improve server and storm water infrastructure to stop overflows.
- Review policies and programs surrounding agriculture to encourage the reduction of run-off.
- Review policies on Sprawl and economic development to add policies and regulations which will have a positive effect on clean water (I.e., green building).

In all cases the interrelationships between clean water and public policies need to be evaluated. The one-shot solutions and projects have not stopped pollution in the Great Lakes. In fact in many cases good projects have been undone because we have not taken a holistic approach.