

It's sink or swim for Winter Park's lakes

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WINTER PARK — As the sun struggled to break through the light morning fog, 15 city officials climbed into a tour boat, pulled their windbreakers close, and headed out to inspect the city's chain of lakes.

An osprey greeted the tour with a whirl of wings, setting off a round of finger pointing and quiet cries of delight.

But sighting the city's remaining wildlife was not the main purpose of the recent hour-and-a-half boat tour.

Winter Park Chain of Lakes

LAKE VIRGINIA

Size: 223 acres.

Location: Southern Winter Park.

Depth: Averages 15-20 feet.

LAKE OSCEOLA

Size: 153 acres.

Location: Central Winter Park.

Depth: Averages 15-20 feet.

LAKE MAITLAND

Size: 465 acres.

Location: North Winter Park.

Depth: Averages 15-20 feet.

LAKE MIZELL

Size: 62 acres.

Location: East of Lake Virginia.

Depth: Averages 12-15 feet.

LAKE NINA

Size: 10 acres.

Location: North of Lake Maitland, in Maitland.

Depth: Averages 10-12 feet.

LAKE MINNEHAHA

Size: 95 acres.

Location: North of Lake Nina, in Maitland.

Depth: Averages 15-20 feet.

Source: Sentinel research.

The city is spending a good deal of money on these lakes, and the tour served to remind officials what they are spending it on and why.

The city believes its 16 lakes are a valuable asset. The lakes and canals add beauty, are a major source of recreation, and, some say, increase property values.

The city is especially concerned about water quality in the chain of lakes, which includes Lakes Virginia, Mizell, Osceola and Lake Maitland in the city. But the city also is working to improve water quality in several of the smaller lakes. Currently, the city has completed about 20 percent of the work necessary to restore Lake Shelton.

"The lakes make Winter Park a very unique and attractive community," said Mayor David Johnston. "We all benefit from the lakes in the sense that they provide needed open space ... and add to the quality of the city."

But over the past several decades, the once clear lakes have evolved into a soupy green mess and the only public swimming beach, at Dinky Dock, repeatedly has been closed because of high bacteria levels.

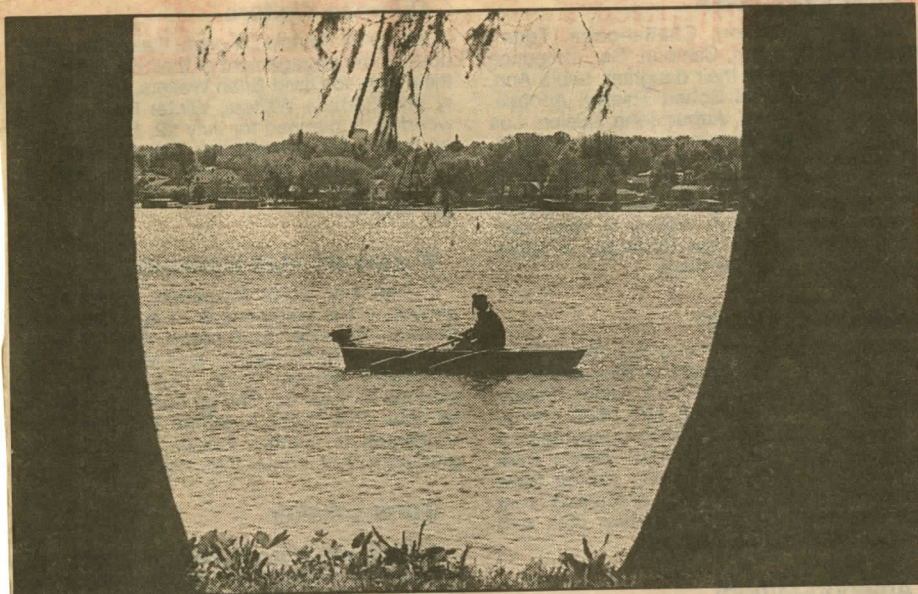
Other cities around Florida are seeking to solve similar water pollution problems. But Winter Park stands out in Central Florida because city officials are really putting money where their mouths are.

Although comparisons are difficult because of different accounting procedures, Winter Park is spending more on its lakes than most area cities.

For example City Manager Phil Penland said Altamonte Springs, which has 36,000 people, last year spent \$350,000 on its lakes and this year plans to spend less than \$100,000.

And Orlando, with 159,000 people, is spending about \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year, said David Pierce, lake enhancement coordinator.

By comparison, with 23,000 people, Winter Park spent \$660,000 last year and has budgeted \$770,000 this year to improve its lakes. Counting only the Save Our Lakes program budget — which does not include the more than \$350,000 annual operating budget of



SENTINEL FILE PHOTO

Boater enjoys peace and quiet on Winter Park's lake Virginia.

the city's lakes division — the city has spent \$1.4 million since the program started in 1984.

"I think the Winter Park program is way ahead of any community program in the state," said City Commissioner Peter Gottfried, a biologist who strongly supports the lakes program.

"We're trying a lot of things, and I think that's the key," he said. "Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

The variety of projects the city is using in hopes of clearing up the lakes include sweeping the streets weekly to keep trash and leaves out of the storm drains; installing "traps" at the ends of drain pipes to catch trash and leaves; planting beneficial underwater plants; and using chemicals to kill hydrilla, a fast-growing aquatic plant that has overtaken many area lakes.

The city also has hired a consultant to set up a stormwater utility, which would raise money through a small charge on residents' monthly water bill. The funds would be used to upgrade the storm drainage system, or to build ponds to catch and filter stormwater instead of letting it flow directly into the lakes.

In addition, Winter Park is conducting several water quality testing projects. Most recently, the city agreed to spend \$150,000 on a four-year study it hopes will pinpoint the major sources of pollution that are muddying the city's waterways.

The U.S. Geological Survey and the

St. Johns River Water Management District will pay for the majority of the \$635,000 study.

The lakes program has across-the-board support on the five-member city commission. However, Gottfried noted that supporters of the lakes are a "quiet constituency." And talk of the stormwater utility fee has raised a hue and cry among fiscally conservative residents — especially those who do not have lakefront homes.

The recent boat tour showed why some land-locked residents object to paying to clean up the lakes. The lakes and canals are lined with boathouses and docks, but only three of these are public: a small dock used as a fishing pier at the end of Canton Avenue, a boat ramp on Lake Maitland maintained by the city of Maitland, and one at Dinky Dock.

In hopes of reopening the beach, the city last year began testing the water there and traced the source of the human waste to faulty plumbing at a nearby convenience store.

A study pinpointing other sources of contamination should be finished this month, clearing the way for reopening the swimming area.

"I think the key to the program is public access and public use," Gottfried said. "If the public beach is closed people will wonder, well, the money is only going to support and develop the lakes for the lakeside residents."