

Lake Baldwin closed by county

High bacteria count is culprit; algae blooms plague other lakes

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Winter Park's Lake Baldwin was one of six area lakes closed to swimmers last week by the Orange County health department because of a high bacteria count. Lakes Osceola, Mizell, Virginia and Minnehaha (in Maitland) are suffering through an unusually severe algae bloom, and Lake Virginia's entire outer perimeter is polluted with fecal coliform bacteria.

It's not a pretty picture for lakeshore residents and others who would like to enjoy the cool lake waters nor for city officials who have been trying for years to come up with a way to clean up the lakes.

City Commissioner Peter Gottfried, also an environmental analyst, said he hopes a study being conducted by a consulting firm now will help the city in determining how to successfully treat the existing pollution problems and prevent further deterioration in the future.

Results of the four-month study, which is being done by Professional Engineering Consultants, are due to be presented to the city, along with a list of recommendations, Aug. 10.

Algae blooms like the ones on Osceola and the other lakes are common, especially during the warm summer months, and are not particularly harmful to humans, said Gottfried. However, they cause the water to take on an unattractive greenish tint and odor which make it unpleasant for recreational use and can kill fish and other aquatic vegetation.

This year's bloom is especially severe because of a combination of factors which include a warmer than usual winter, lack of sufficient rain recently and a lack of vegetation along the lake shore.

The city's new lakeshore protection ordinance passed last month may help alleviate the yearly algae bloom problem, said Gottfried, by not allowing lakeshore residents to clear more than 30 feet of their shoreline. Those who have already cleared more than 30 feet must either allow natural revegetation of the area or replant it themselves.

Many residents vehemently opposed the ordinance because they said it put unnecessary restrictions on them as property owners and that the growth of weeds at the shoreline not only detracts from the appearance and value

of the property but also serves as a gathering place for snakes and alligators.

"There are two sides to the property value issue," said Gottfried, also a realtor and member of the Orlando Area Board of Realtors. "I can see property values really falling in the future if we don't do something to clean up the lakes now. Who will want to buy a waterfront home here only to look out on a scummy, polluted lake?"

Replanting and/or letting vegetation grow back naturally along the lakeshores is just one step in many which are needed, said Gottfried, but

it's a step in the right direction toward improving the lakes' water quality.

At the same time, the city is taking steps to remove noxious plants and weeds such as hydrilla which choke and pollute the lakes.

One question which Gottfried hopes the ongoing study will be able to answer is whether the fecal bacteria polluting lake Virginia is coming from animal or human waste.

"We need to know whether it's coming from perhaps a sewer line leak or if it's dogs and cats, or what's causing it before we can figure out what to do about it," said Gottfried. "The

lake is closed to swimmers, but the skiers are at risk too, because for all intents and purposes, the whole lake is contaminated."

The current consultants' study is also reviewing past studies done by Rollins College and other information about the city's lakes, sewer and drainage systems.

Stormwater runoff is thought to be another major factor contributing to the lakes' pollution, and the city has stepped up its street sweeping program and is also considering installing filters in storm drains to catch debris before it enters the lakes.