



Brief History of Dunham Lake

It's a peaceful autumn day. The sun shimmers off the sparkling blue-green lake as a solitary fisherman rows to his favorite spot. Tall cedars line a shoreline, hills covered with Fiery hardwoods and dark green spruce rise behind them. Children explore the woods, while the adults ramble along paths paralleling the water. Only a few houses can be seen.

This could be the scene from any of dozens of northern Michigan lakes: the last weekend at a vacation cottage 'Up North' before everything settles in for a housebound winter.

But this is no northern retreat. This is Dunham Lake, a pristine blue-green jewel nestled on the border of Livingston and Oakland Counties in Southeast Michigan. And these people are not vacationers They are some of the approximately 360 property owners who live in Dunham year-round in a community planned primarily to conserve the natural beauty of their lake treasure, while at the same time allowing them full access to the water via a protected greenbelt.

First a more detailed description of the lake and its environs. Dunham Lake is a 110 acre glacial lake located in Highland Township, Oakland County and Hartland Township, Livingston County. It was formed anywhere from 7,000 to 10,000 years ago from a block of ice broken off by the retreating glacier - a so-called 'kettle lake'. Dunham has three deep basins, the deepest one about 125 feet, making it one of the deepest, if not the deepest lake in Southeast Michigan. There is a submerged mound (called the "sunken island" by most residents) in the middle of the lake that rises to within two feet of the surface. It is a hard water lake. Such lakes are characterized by a distinctive blue-green color and Dunham is no exception. The sight of the lake on a sunny day reminds one of Caribbean waters.

What sets Dunham apart from most other residential lakes is the buffer strip, or "greenbelt" that surrounds approximately two-thirds of the lake and is deeded to the property owners of Dunham Lakes Estates, the subdivision that almost encircles it. The greenbelt ranges in width from about 100 to almost 400 feet. Cedar trees, planted in the 1930's, abound as do other conifers, towering hardwoods such as oak, cherry and maple, and berry producing shrubs, a favorite with the numerous birds in the area. Paths run along the lake and up, on the higher ridges, allowing residents ample

opportunity to stroll along and enjoy the view, or enjoy cross country skiing in the winter.

There are two sandy beaches for the use of association members and their guests, as well as a grassy lakeside park with play equipment and picnic tables. There are no motors of any kind allowed in the lake, by DNR decree. On a breezy summer day, windsurfers and sailboats crisscross the lake providing entertainment for those on board, as well as those on shore.

Besides providing access to the lake for all residents, and a beautiful green 'frame' for the lake, Dunham's greenbelt provides a much more important purpose. Despite the approximately 400 homes, complete with septic tanks and tile fields, that surround it, Dunham Lake is blessed with pure water. And not a drop of chemicals has ever been used to control water quality or weed growth in the lake.

Dr. Wallace Fusilier of Water Quality Investigators of Dexter did an extensive water quality survey of Dunham Lake in 1984. His report gives Dunham Lake a Water Quality Index value of 92, which designates the water quality as 'excellent'. Dr. Fusilier credits the greenbelt for much of the water's purity. The buffer strip provides excellent protection for the lake. It filters, removes, and absorbs nutrients from the lots, which border the lake. The inclusion of the buffer strip between the lake and the subdivision by the developer was an extremely wise one. It is unfortunate that more lakes do not have this excellent form of protection.'

At most residential lakes, especially in the more popular areas of the state, it is fashionable to have huge sweeping lawns, rich with fertilizer, reach down and touch the water. These nutrient rich lawns can cause nutrient-rich lakes, with the accompanying problem of algae and weeds. Why did Dunham Lake escape this potential problem? Why was the greenbelt made a part of the subdivision from the very beginning? A little history is in order.

In the 1920's the Wallace family lived in a farmhouse on Dunham Road in Hartland a short stroll from the lake. Henry Wallace began buying up all available land around the lake in an effort to keep the area in its natural state. One day Wallace heard a talk by the noted Canadian bird enthusiast, Jack Miner, who had a bird sanctuary in Ontario along the migratory flyway. The sanctuary is still there today.) Wallace was so impressed by Miner that he decided to use his Dunham Lake property the same way.

Trees were planted caretakers hired and wild rice sown in the shallows of the lake to attract Canada Geese. The area became a State Wildlife Refuge and Federal Game

Preserve. Wallace continued to increase his land holdings on both the Hartland and Highland sides of the lake and the refuge prospered.

Upon Wallace's death in 1949, the property was put up for sale. A consortium of five businessmen, headed by former governor of Michigan. Murray D. Van Wagoner (1940-42) purchased it in its entirety. However, the seller imposed certain restrictions on the deed. The area could be developed, yes. But the firing of guns, and hunting of any kind was prohibited. And the purchaser was required to submit a plan to preserve the beauty and purity of the lake.

It was Van Wagoner who came up with the idea of the greenbelt. The other members of Dunham Lake Development" Corporation were doubtful, but Van Wagoner prevailed. The greenbelt was incorporated into the development plan. it was to become an area for recreation and beauty, but also a valuable guard against pollution. In 1984 the Dunham Lake Property Owner's Association dedicated its park to Murray Van Wagoner in recognition of his foresight.

In Dr. Fusilier's report he states, "The most important factor for maintaining the high water quality of Dunham Lake in the future is the attitude of the residents. If they maintain their current level of concern and vigilance, no change in the lake water quality should be visible in their life-times.

To that end, a governing body called the Dunham Lake Civic Committee is ultimately responsible for the protection of the lakes and greenbelt. It works through an elected Dunham Lake Property Owner's Association Board of Directors. Perhaps most importantly, the Civic Committee is legally empowered through deed restrictions to assess and collect association dues, approve building plans, and provide funds to the association board for preservation and improvement projects.

The elected board is made up of eleven members elected to two-year terms each. Greenbelt preservation, water quality, and fisheries management have been three items high on priority of current boards. In addition to the water quality survey done in 1984, a fish survey was completed in 1987.

Preliminary reports indicate a healthy fish population, with pan-fish, large mouth bass, and bullheads predominate. Several large pike and trout were also harvested during the survey.

A four-year greenbelt survey will be completed next year. Surveyors marked lot lines between residential property and the greenbelt. Association members then marked these points with 4 x 4 wolmanized numbered posts. It is hoped that this effort will halt any encroachment by homeowners into the parklands by clearly defining

boundaries. In some areas of encroachment reforestation projects have begun and will be continued during the next years.

Dunham Lake is a wonderful place to live. Centrally located between Lansing, Detroit, Flint and Ann Arbor, residents can live in a vacation-like setting while commuting to any of dozens of corporations and businesses. The design of the subdivision makes clean water and abundant recreation a reality. It is through the vigilance of the residents that this can be passed down as an inheritance to future generations.

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