

## **“Go, Little Antrim!”**

### *A Small Town’s Effort to Protect Its Lake’s Water Quality*

Joan Gorga

Nearly five years ago, large clumps of algae began to appear in Gregg Lake. Nobody remembered seeing such clumps before, and none of us could explain what was causing them, but the concern extended from the Gregg Lake community to the rest of the town and beyond. A year later, Sara Steiner, who coordinates the volunteer lake water testing program (VLAP) for the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Sciences (NHDES), suggested that we consider applying for Watershed Assistance Grant funding from NHDES to develop a watershed management plan (WMP) to figure out what was causing our problem. A few of us decided to see if we could put together a group to undertake the project.

Those who stepped forward to be part of our core working group were a diverse bunch with a wide range of interests, backgrounds, and volunteer roles in Antrim, and we thought we had the skills to develop a WMP. We prepared a grant pre-proposal, the first step in the application process. NHDES invited us for an interview—they wanted to see if we were for real. They were considering taking the risk of awarding us the \$25,000 in grant funding we had requested, but had never had a group make a proposal like ours. Most towns or lake associations raise \$100,000 to \$150,000 for the purpose of paying someone else to prepare a WMP for them. We, on the other hand, proposed to do most of the work ourselves, with no financial input from the Town of Antrim; all of the town’s match (40% of the total project cost; a minimum of \$16,675) would come from our volunteer time. NHDES assured us that we would be putting in more than enough time to meet the match. (We should have taken that as a warning!)

We had described our volunteer roles in Antrim—Conservation Commission, Water and Sewer Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, etc.—in our proposal, but not our professional credentials. Those of us who were able to attend the December weekday interview in Concord—with three taking off from work to be there—introduced ourselves: Peter Beblowski, geologist at NHDES; Melissa Lombard, geochemist at USGS; David Ward, certified GIS professional; Ben Pratt, retired professional engineer; and me, retired biochemist. Our interviewers quickly began to believe we were for real. When they asked if we thought we could actually do the job of putting together a WMP, I said, “Well... possibly... maybe...,” but David said, “We can and we will!” And that’s what they wanted to hear.

Eventually, our interviewers asked me a question about the town’s finances, and I said, “Ask Ben,” who had been pretty quiet until then, “He’s our Town Treasurer.” It was priceless to see their faces—their jaws dropped and they turned to Ben, saying, “You are?” Ben gave a big grin and

responded “I am!” Not only did we have the professional credentials, this was a group of town officials (Conservation Commission Chair, Water and Sewer Commission Chair, Parks & Rec Commission Chair, *and* Treasurer) working together with seasonal residents, landowners and recreational lake users to protect the water quality in our lake. Were we for real? Absolutely!

The Watershed Assistance Section decided to take the risk with funding our proposal, and invited us to continue with the full grant application, which we submitted in January 2017. They assured us that they would stand behind us—their goal was for us to succeed.

In May, a few days after my husband’s heart attack and bypass surgery, I took a little detour on my way to Catholic Medical Center to attend a talk one of our interviewers was giving at the annual Lakes Congress in Meredith. (Had my in-laws known of my morning-long detour, my husband’s health problems would have been minor compared to mine!) I was surprised to see a slide describing Antrim’s low-budget grant application. The speaker noticed me among the hundred or so in the audience, smiled and said “Go, Little Antrim!” I took that as an indication we were still in the running for funding, and hurried on down to Manchester in good spirits. Decision-making was slow that year, but finally, in December 2017, we were notified that the Governor and Council had approved our full grant application. When I got the call from NHDES that all systems were go, they were surprised at a “Woo Hoo!” response; I guess most groups aren’t really so thrilled to find out that they’re going to have to do so much work. Perhaps it was just that we didn’t really know what we were getting into...

Since then, the five of us who attended the initial interview, along with the other hard-working members of our core committee, Cathy Spedden, Helen Perivier, Frank Gorga, Suzy Ward and George and Michelle Caughey, have put literally thousands of hours into the project. Other seasonal and year-round residents have also contributed as they’ve been able. We’ve analyzed forty years’ worth of water quality data, surveyed septic systems, identified and evaluated erosion hotspots, and hired professional environmental consultants to perform analysis and advise us in areas where we’re not qualified to make judgements. For two years in a row, we performed monthly VLAP sampling from April through October to get a better idea of what’s going on in the lake. We’ve written detailed reports and held public meetings to set a water-quality goal and discuss our action plan to achieve that goal. We’ve prepared a detailed Action Plan, with anticipated milestones and tracking systems in place. And we’ve set up an Outreach Plan

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that covers critical elements of encouraging private land-owners to embrace the WMP. We hope to fully complete the WMP by the end of March, and have scheduled a public WMP rollout on **March 17 at 5:30 p.m. at Little Town Hall**. We've been guided every step of the way by NHDES and our environmental consultants to ensure that our final WMP is compliant with Environmental Protection Agency standards. We've learned more than we thought possible about factors contributing to water quality issues in Gregg Lake, and have a very good idea about what to do to alleviate the problems.

It's going to be a challenge to achieve the WMP goals to remove Gregg Lake from the "Impaired" list, but even before we formally finished the WMP, both the town and lake-side residents began implementing parts of the plan. One couple investigated their antiquated septic system, found it to be a leaking concrete block cesspool and replaced it with a system that meets current code. Replacement of another elusive (meaning, "We can't find it!") and presumed failed septic system has been permitted. Jim Plourde and his high-way crew have already started working on some of the sites that are the worst offenders as far as road erosion and storm-water runoff. And several lakeshore residents have begun to assess the effects of stormwater runoff from their private properties. We have also been the beneficiaries of two new conservation easements, one protecting 900 acres in the vicinity of the Antrim Wind farm and "Caughey Forest," protecting an undeveloped 57-acre parcel including over 2000 feet of Gregg Lake shoreline. Not everyone will like some of the recommendations we'll be making, but these are actions we have to take to protect the lake over the long term.

As NHDES informed us at our original interview, they want the Town of Antrim to succeed at developing a WMP on a small budget. After I said during the interview that we felt that the more we did ourselves the better we would understand what we need to do to improve our lake's water quality, there was a long pause—long enough for me to wonder if I had truly said something wrong—but then they assured us that they fully agreed with us, they'd just never

heard anyone say it before. They're using us as a test case, so the pressure is on to show that a small town can indeed develop a WMP on a small budget. "Go, Little Antrim!"

VLAP coordinator Sara Steiner invited us to be one of three New Hampshire groups giving presentations on developing WMPs at the North American Lake Management Society (NALMS) meeting last November, which was held in Burlington, Vermont. The title Sara gave the Gregg Lake talk?—"Harnessing Local Expertise to Develop a Watershed Management Plan on a Small Budget." After that presentation, I received several requests for advice from people in the US and Canada about how the Town of Antrim has gone about doing this ourselves, as well as compliments on the thoroughness of our Water Quality Summary and other helpful suggestions for us. In addition, since the NALMS session was well received, we've been asked to present a similar session at the upcoming Lakes Congress in Meredith in May. All three of us who spoke at NALMS agreed to do it again, with updates—we in New Hampshire do recognize the importance of high water quality in our lakes and rivers. In my talks, I've tried to tell the audience that they, too, could put together a group like we have that would work hard together to achieve a common goal.

While we've been led step-by-step through the sometimes agonizing process of developing a WMP, we as a town have indeed developed a very good understanding of the stresses Gregg Lake is facing and what we need to do about them. We understand from the perspectives of the Parks & Recreation Commission, the Conservation Commission, the Water & Sewer Commission, the Town Treasurer, the Highway Department, lake residents, Summah People, beach users, kayakers, fishers, boaters and anyone else who would take the time to explain their thoughts to us. We hope this gives the Town of Antrim an advantage in implementing our WMP.

Go, Little Antrim! Are we for real? ☐



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