Stormwater utilities can help make Lake Hopatcong healthy | Opinion

Elliott Ruga  Published 3:04 p.m. ET July 3, 2019

The primary culprit that is causing the algae blooms in Lake Hopatcong and other recreational lakes and reservoirs in northern New Jersey is untreated stormwater, which carries a slew of toxins from hard surfaces, such as roads and parking lots, and washes contaminants directly into the lake. This condition, if it continues unchecked, could be devastating to the economies of Lake Hopatcong’s communities, which depend on the recreational use of the lake by residents and visitors.

The good news is that a bill that recently passed in Trenton allows municipalities, counties or a combination of municipalities, to form a stormwater utility, which can construct any number of “green infrastructure” projects that serve to intercept stormwater runoff, and filter out the contamination, before it enters the lake. The thing is, meaningful and effective stormwater solutions cost money and require regular maintenance. A stormwater utility, similar to a water, or sewer authority, can charge user fees in order finance their operations. A stormwater utility could charge properties based on the size of impervious surfaces they have.

A quiet Lake Hopatcong on Monday, July 1, 2019, in Hopatcong, NJ.
(Photo: Danielle Parhizkar/NorthJersey.com)

It is a rather simple concept — a property owner pays a fee based on how much they contribute to the problem, and the fees go directly to the construction of rain gardens, bioswales, permeable pavements,
green roofs and other systems that will solve the problem. If thousands of properties shoulder the costs the impact to any one property would be quite low. Properties that implement their own stormwater management measures would have their fee reduced accordingly. By participating in a stormwater utility and paying the necessary fees, property owners are also protecting their property values, as property values would tank if Lake Hopatcong beaches were regularly closed due to harmful algae blooms.

**Not heeding the warning:** Some ignoring Lake Hopatcong 'no swimming' advisory

Green infrastructure projects have the added value of improving the character of the community because they are constructed with natural systems — plants, trees, gardens, etc., which serve to enhance the community’s landscape.

![Image of beach closed sign and no swimming sign at Lake Hopatcong](Photo: Danielle Parhizkaran/NorthJersey.com)

Of course the option exists to do nothing. And that is what the District 24 Legislators are advocating. Misleadingly calling a stormwater utility fee a “tax,” Sen. Steve Oroho, and Assemblymen Parker Space and Harold Wirths, are pressing the towns around Lake Hopatcong and in their district to pass resolutions not to establish stormwater utilities. They claim that “municipalities already have stormwater systems in place that manage stormwater.”

Not really. Municipalities only role in stormwater management is in requiring new construction projects to incorporate stormwater systems. There is no entity anywhere funding stormwater solutions for what is already built. And certainly, whatever stormwater management systems there are in place now, they are inadequate in addressing the pollution of Lake Hopatcong.

We can sit back and watch the livelihoods of those who depend on a swimmable and fishable Lake Hopatcong wither away, the attraction for those who visit the lake to disappear and property values
diminish. Or we can tackle the problem, effectively and equitably, by ignoring the District 24 representatives in Trenton and making the Lake great again.

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