Lakes on the Urban Fringe: Recreation Challenges in a Growing Community

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As more and more people move back to the nation’s revitalizing and walkable cities, many communities on the peripheries of those cities are also seeing their own renewals. One of those communities is Reston, Virginia, a more than 50-year-old planned community 23 miles west of Washington, D.C. With the opening of the Silver Line, part of the DC Metro area’s rail system, Reston, and Tysons to its east, has seen a huge boom in development interest. Soon, many new residents will call Reston home.

Most of this development will be in the rail corridor, leaving the bulk of Reston’s nearly 12-square miles close to its original planned design, including its extensive open space and park system with lakes and ponds, recreational facilities and miles of trails connecting all parts of the community. It is no secret in the DC Metro area that places like Reston, located on the urban fringe and becoming more urban, are attractive places to live, work, and play. It is the play part that gives Reston Association (RA), the community service organization that owns and operates the extensive recreation and natural resource system in the community, the biggest challenges as the community enters its second half-century.

Reston is home to four lakes: Anne, Thoreau, Audubon, and Newport, ranging in size from 12.5 to 45 acres. These multi-use impoundments serve as stormwater management facilities, backdrops for expensive real estate, fish and wildlife habitat, and, most importantly, a water-based playground for Reston’s residents and their guests. Also, let us not forget the many non-residents who ply their trespassing trade under the guise of being actual residents!

On the Water

As one might expect, the most popular lake-based recreation activity is boating. Not unlike most planned communities, RA has governing documents that outline its covenants, conditions and restrictions (CCRs), and one of the oldest continuous restrictions is an 18-foot length limit on boats, along with no gasoline motors. What is amazing is how frequently these restrictions are ignored, thus setting up a sometimes old western movie-style showdown between an owner and the covenants or legal committee of the association. Just this summer a resident challenged the 18-foot covenant on the hope that a Board of Director’s vote would permit the owner to keep it on the lake. Fortunately, the Board agreed with the Covenants Committee and the owner will now have to shorten the boat or remove it from the lake.

Over the past few years the RA Board of Directors, the governing body for the association, has passed resolutions permitting interpretations on the types of vessels that may be used on the lakes, including sailboards and most recently, stand-up paddleboards, or SUPs, covered in great detail elsewhere in this issue of LakeLine. RA utilizes a contractor to teach SUP lessons as well as provide some revenue back to the association (Figure 1). This is a similar set-up to

Figure 1. SUP yoga has been a popular addition to recreational opportunities at the Reston Association. Photo by Jim Kirby, used with permission.
the canoe and kayak instruction that has been operating for several years on Reston’s lakes. This is an opportunity for residents who do not live on or near a lake to enjoy the benefit of the resource they help maintain through their annual assessments. As this article was being written RA received its first complaint about SUPs and the paddlers’ apparent disregard for the difficulty in stopping a pontoon boat headed in their general direction (Figure 2)!

**In the Water**

One of the difficulties RA has is the lack of open water in the DC Metro area for water-based recreation. Most lakes are private, or in the case of the few public lakes, are inconvenient to be used casually or on the spur of a moment especially in northern Virginia’s notoriously bad traffic. Local park organizations have lake access points for fishing on lakes and local tributaries to the Potomac River but none are close to Reston. The mighty Potomac River is nearby, with two reasonably close access points, but the size, current and relatively frequent high water makes it less attractive to the more timid recreation seekers.

While on the subject of open water, swimming by both residents and non-residents is a constant problem. As a not-for-profit corporation, RA is in the private insurance market and does not allow swimming except for three Board of Directors-approved events (Figure 3). Unlike most municipalities, RA is not covered by a sovereign immunity statute, and while those statutes are not fool-proof it is one means of defense not afforded to private entities.

The three swimming events include a Polar Dip held in February, the Reston Triathlon, one of, if not the, oldest triathlon in the Commonwealth, and one of the oldest annual open water
swim competitions in the state, the Jim McDonnell Lake Swim (JMLS). These have been conducted each year for 33 and 29 years respectively (Figures 3 and 4). Outside of a clinic held before each of the marquee events, no open water swimming is permitted. This is one of the most frequent requests RA receives each year as triathletes and swimmers who want to hone their skills only have a single venue on the Potomac River to practice. Given this fact it is easy to see why so many trespass onto Reston’s lakes to swim under the stealth of near darkness and when association staff is less likely to confront them!

_E coli_ testing is done before the two swimming events per the requirements of the sanctioning organizations, and two times the swim portion of the Reston Triathlon has been canceled due to poor water quality and debris in the lake. On one occasion the JMLS was moved to another lake due to poor water conditions.

**From the Water**

While on the subject of organisms in the water, no article on lake-based recreation would be complete without discussing fishing! Ahh… fishermen! Both authors are fisher-people and yet some of the most mean-spirited conversations we have encountered have been with other anglers. Whether the timing of a dredging project, the use of aquatic herbicides for invasive aquatic plant control, or kicking them off one of the lakes for not being a Reston resident, a season rarely go by without a good tongue-lashing. Lake access is the single recreation access privilege of Reston membership that cannot currently be bought into, as is the case with non-resident pool and tennis court access or program participation (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Swimmers cross open water under the watchful eye of a paddle boarder. Photo by Jim Kirby, used with permission.

Figure 5. Fishing is a recreational opportunity provided to RA residents only. Photo by Jim Kirby, used with permission.
Part of the reason for this is the expense of maintaining these facilities—whether dam maintenance, dredging, water quality monitoring, aquatic plant control, shoreline stabilization, and litter pick-up etc.—all supported by the annual assessment. Will it be this way in the future as more people living close to Reston’s lakes increase these pressures to open access up to non-residents? What might be their willingness to pay for such privilege? This is a policy discussion that would ultimately be decided by the Board of Directors and no doubt greatly influenced by the voices of many lakefront and lakeside owners.

The attraction to water is summed up well in this quote by Michael Faraday, where he states “Water is to me, I confess, a phenomenon which continually awakens new feelings of wonder as often as I view it.” Reston’s lakes are just such an attraction, and with many more people realizing the accessibility to their shorelines, and though sometimes not legally, to their surfaces, Reston’s lakes will continue to be a management challenge into the future (Figure 6).

These challenges are certainly not unique to Reston. In those areas where large bodies of water with multiple public access points exist, the pressures may be less. One measure might be the lake surface area to population ratio. In Reston there are approximately 62,000 residents and 125 acres of accessible surface waters, or 480 people per acre. As the population grows, so too will the pressures on these community resources.

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Figure 6. The attraction of RA’s lakes will require continued vigilance by recreational managers. Photo by Jim Kirby, used with permission.