

Increase access to the lake to more people

Vision by Lee Botts

Now is the time to save the Lake Michigan shoreline for future generations.

As U.S. Rep. Pete Visclosky, D-Ind., says, Northwest Indiana has the kind of opportunity for a decision that comes once in a hundred years. The decision is how best to use the shoreline that provides access to the region's most important natural resource, Lake Michigan.

The present use of the shoreline came about without planning or consistent public policy. It just happened. The result is a mishmash of industrial, residential and public policy. The result is a mishmash of industrial, residential and public owners who allow too little access for people in general.

Taking advantage of new opportunities to increase public access is essential to economic diversification and the quality of life for the people who live here.

Indiana has only 45 miles of shoreline, but Indiana uses the shoreline intensively.

About one third is industrial use and about one third residential. The final third is publicly owned for recreation and protection of natural areas.

The coastal zone is considered to be the parts of the three counties that are within the narrow drainage basin for Lake Michigan, mainly the northern parts of Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties. Even so, there are 27 towns and cities within this small area.

Industrialization was considered the best use of the shoreline by Indiana for nearly 150 years until recently and is still important. But, the steel mills, power plants and the big refinery that were the major industrial users in the past do not need as much land for future operations.

This offers opportunity for new uses.

The one-third that is in residential use is mainly in Porter and LaPorte counties, mixed among industrial and public uses. The bottom of the lake and the shoreline itself up to the high water mark designated by state law belong to the general public. Several residential areas restrict access to the shoreline except for people who live there by controlling entrance or restricting parking.

That leaves access for everyone else, including out-of-state visitors, only in the state and national parks that are mainly in Porter County or in the few municipal parks along the shoreline in Lake and LaPorte counties. Chunks of the immediate shoreline owned by cities are now occupied by casinos.

One of the problems is that there is least public access where there is the greatest concentration of people.

More than 500,000 of the approximately 750,000 total population for the three counties live in Lake County, which has the greatest concentration of industry and the smallest proportion of public ownership at the water's edge.

Many of the children who come with their school classes to the Indiana Dunes Environmental Learning Center are from Hammond, Gary and East Chicago as well as from Highland or Griffith; they have never before been on a Lake Michigan beach.

Indiana's new Lake Michigan Coastal Program offers some opportunity to increase public access with funding now available under the federal Coastal Zone Management Act. The federal dollars will be distributed through partnerships with public agencies, including towns and cities within the coastal zone.

The new Shoreline Commission created by State Sen. Earl Harris, D-East Chicago, offers another opportunity for new decisions on use of the shoreline. The emphasis is on economic development, but experience elsewhere demonstrates that increasing public access adds economic value to the shoreline.

Chicago considers its publicly owned lakefront its most important economic asset because it brings both businesses and tourists from all over the world to the city.

Last December at a meeting of big city mayors of the Great Lakes, Williams Testa, vice president of the Federal Reserve Board in Chicago, told them that quality of life for people is now the most important decision factor for corporations. This is why other cities that are now trying to increase public access and recreational uses of their waterfronts include Toronto, Cleveland, Detroit and Buffalo.

The opportunity to spend a day at the beach is not the only way restoring natural conditions and returning shorelines to public uses improve the quality of life. Better water quality, more habitat for wildlife and the opportunity to enjoy nature firsthand are additional benefits.

Still, if the predictions of scientists that global warming will make the climate of Northwest Indiana more like Oklahoma by the end of this century come true, access to Lake Michigan to cool off will be more important than ever.

Lee Botts is an environmentalist and founder of the Indiana Dunes Environmental Learning Center.