

Hammonton accepts proposal to clean up, reopen polluted lake

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HAMMONTON — Nine months later, they took the deal. Six months from now, Hammonton Lake might even be open. In March, Town Council passed on a money-back-guaranteed offer from a businessman who thought he could clean Hammonton Lake. Officials got another chance this week, and they took the offer, making a CLEAN-FLO International water aeration system part of a larger project to reopen the lake for swimming before summer begins.

The plan also includes a herbicide treatment, the lowering of the lake to clean up old boats and the bulkhead, and an infrared sweep of the lake to find out where the pollution is coming from. The high coliform bacteria counts that have closed the lake to swimmers come from fecal matter, which was thought to be from the resident geese population. But the mayor says the bacteria count is rising, despite a declining number of geese.

“You’re getting some of the fecal coliform from stormwater runoffs, but the numbers we’re seeing could be a leaking of septic systems ... or a combination of everything,” Mayor John DiDonato said.

After opening to swimmers for only 13 days in 2005, Hammonton Lake did not open to swimmers at all in 2006. If the plan goes well, the town could open part of the lake by late May or mid-June 2007.

The lake’s problems, centering on weed and algae growth choking life from the lake, have gone on for about a decade and are common throughout the country. The town began cursory discussions about seven years ago with CLEAN-FLO International, according to its president, Brian Kling. Kling set the deadline in March for council to act on his offer.

His system — at just less than \$40,000 for Hammonton — is supposed to circulate oxygen into the lake, allowing aquatic life to reach the depths now covered by sludge. With life circulating there once again, in theory, there should be more microorganisms to break down the pollutants throughout the lake.

After council missed Kling’s deadline, Kling said he did not even like talking about the issue there, adding that it felt like he was wasting his time making trips to Hammonton.

“We had to talk to him and show him that while we understood there was a time limit ... we needed to do our due diligence to make sure we were doing right by the taxpayers,” DiDonato said.

The town set up a subcommittee to explore the issue and came up with the more extensive plan. The subcommittee may have private donors to fund the infrared sweep of the lake and has suggested using Richard Stockton College of New Jersey students to do the research, DiDonato said.

“CLEAN-FLO will clean up what's there, but we also need to stop what's coming into the lake on an ongoing basis,” the mayor added.

The town will need to apply for permits from the state's Department of Environmental Protection and Pinelands Commission. The system needs to be installed by early April, before water warms enough for algae and weeds to grow.

If the plan works, council could buy two more CLEAN-FLO systems to clean the rest of the lake, DiDonato said.

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