

## Lakefront property proposal in Pine County roils residents

Tiny Windemere Township has a high concentration of lakes, popular Sturgeon and Sand among them. But shoreline is overbuilt, planners say, and it's hurting area waters.

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Sand Lake in Pine County's Windemere Township, about 45 minutes southwest of Duluth. (Jana Hollingsworth)

MOOSE LAKE, Minn. – A push to curb development and protect extensive lakeshore in an east-central Minnesota township has riled property owners.

A planning commission for Windemere Township, about 50 miles southwest of Duluth, proposes changes to shoreland management rules that would require new shorefront construction to be built on lots that are at least 5 acres in size — up from 2.5 acres.

Sturgeon Lake resident and landowner Tom Anderson said he stands to lose \$2 million in lost investments if eight of his developable lots morph into four.

“We’ve been on the lake for 45 years,” he said, and he’s bought 100 acres in all to both preserve green space and have land for his kids. “Everybody that loses a lot loses the price of a lot.”

Anderson was part of a packed and sometimes heated public hearing earlier this week, where lot sizes, increased setbacks and perceptions of township overreach were central issues. Residents wondered why Windemere needed more restrictive rules than the county’s.

The ordinance revisions are in response to a settlement agreement with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The agency in 2021 asked the township to update its shoreland ordinance and to require more from a major Sand Lake resort expansion than just a building permit. But the permit was granted and the ordinance stayed the same, so the DNR sued the resort and the township. Revisions have been in the works for months, but the lot size requirement was added only recently.

“Windemere Township is ecologically overtaxed, and we need to slow down the growth,” commission chair Paul Horgen said at the meeting.

He added in a later interview that the majority of properties in the township of 1,500 have private septic systems. Municipal water systems would alleviate the need to hamper growth, he said, but the township needs to apply for grants to help pay for the transition, and a past survey showed lake property owners didn’t want them. Even beginning now, it would take years to install such a regulated system, he said.

Commission vice-chair Vern C. Anderson II read at the meeting a November letter from the Pine County zoning office. It told the township that Sturgeon Lake had a problem with flooded land and sewage disposal systems — one that shouldn’t be ignored.

“‘It appears that the gross mismanagement of this watershed, both legal and illegal, has occurred over many years,’” Anderson read from the letter. “ ‘Much unwise development has compounded the problem.’ ”

And nothing has been done for more than 50 years, he said.

Several residents asked the commission to consider adopting Pine County’s ordinance. Commission members said Windemere’s abundance of lakes made it unique in the county, requiring a tougher stance to preserve water quality and prevent shoreline erosion.

Residents warned of unintended consequences, including lawsuits and poor optics.

A larger lot requirement for home construction could be seen as “an exclusionary tool to prevent average, middle-class people from owning lakeshore or lake-adjacent property,” said Island Lake resident Andrew West.

Other proposed changes include requiring RVs and other recreational vehicles with living space to be mobile and hooked up to septic systems, and not used as stationary homes. Too many lots have multiple campers used in that way, many right on the shore and without septic, Horgen said.

“We have to protect the ecosystem, which means we have to protect water quality,” he said. “That’s what it’s all about.”

The township has a moratorium on building permits while the ordinance is decided.

The planning commission, a group of volunteers, will present its final recommendation to the town board Tuesday, which is then expected to vote.

*Correction: Earlier versions of this story contained the incorrect year the township was told it shouldn't ignore its flooding and sewage disposal systems. It was warned in 1973.*