

February 3, 2015

Presentation to the Pigeon Lake Chamber of Commerce

“Return to the Shores of Pigeon lake Summit”

Introduction

As the Mayor of the Summer Village of Grandview, I am pleased to participate in your meeting today. I firmly believe we have many challenges facing us as we try to enjoy our beautiful lake and that with sensible actions, together we can change the impressions that are being created by bad press and perhaps misguided actions.

I will address three different issues today: how the Summer Village of Grandview is tackling the issue of watershed stewardship, my submission to Alberta Health regarding the process and need for issuing health advisories, and finally my recommendation for the path forward.

Summer Village of Grandview

The Summer Village Council has recognized that special actions must be taken to protect our lake. I am afraid that the dire warnings of the experts, including Dr. David Schindler, are coming true. Improper development, the destruction of the shoreline, the removal of protective vegetation, the use of fertilizers and the continued existence of septic fields are all having a cumulative effect on the health of the lake. Grandview has recently passed a land use bylaw which specifically includes provisions designed to protect the lake. No longer will retaining walls be allowed on the lakeshore, vegetation must be preserved, and construction techniques must address nutrient runoff. Our ditches, which are designed to be low velocity soak aways, must be maintained. We have also introduced a new bylaw which prohibits the use of lawn fertilizers and herbicides. We are the first municipality in Alberta to pass such a bylaw. We know that fertilizers are an important source of nutrients for cyanobacteria and yet they are widely used around our lake with only three municipalities having fertilizer bans.

We also have changed all of our municipal reserves into environmental reserves. This means that our many natural areas in our village will remain in their current natural state. Another important initiative we undertook in conjunction with the PLWA was the Grandview Creek restoration project. A parcel of land adjoining a creek is being restored into a natural area and the creek protected from the passage of cattle. Over the past two years, this riparian area has changed from black dirt banks to a healthy natural riparian area.

Our Summer Village also administered the Himalayan Balsam Eradication Project. After 5 years, we have finally eliminated this prohibited noxious weed from the shoreline. Five years ago, half of the lake's shoreline was dominated by this plant and now they are gone. This coming year, there are still a few spots in the watershed where they will be removed. This is surely a good news story for Pigeon Lake and shows the success we can achieve when we all "pull" together!

Grandview wants to set the standard on how municipal councils take on their responsibilities for living by a lake and Council has resolved to be the leader in watershed stewardship. I feel confident in saying our community has been highly supportive. At our public hearing for our new land use bylaw and the new fertilizer/herbicide bylaw, I was expecting to have a significant degree of resistance to somewhat onerous development conditions but, to my surprise, the hearing ended to a resounding round of applause. I believe that our residents, all residents of the lake, want our lake protected and expect action.

Alberta Health Advisories for Cyanobacteria

Pigeon Lake has received a yearly dose of bad press over the past decade. First there was that iconic photograph gaining almost a half-page prominence in the Edmonton Journal of the 2006 algae bloom on Pigeon Lake. Since Alberta Health Services started monitoring recreational lakes for water quality issues, including fecal coliforms and cyanobacteria and their subsequent issuing of health advisories, the press seems to have focussed on Pigeon Lake. Not only have they continued to use the 2006 photograph, most recently claiming it to be from 2013, but they have also used this picture to portray algae blooms at other lakes, such as Wizard. And then, to make matters worse, they published an article about blue green algae with pictures of the most awful infestations imaginable; only to have their readers believe that Pigeon Lake was covered with this green mat of algae. During the summer, I walk a good portion of the shoreline each week on the Himalayan Balsam project and while there have been some degree of algae blooms, for a good portion of the summer the water was crystal clear. Even the Swim Guide was showing the beaches at Pigeon Lake as being "closed" for the majority of the summer. The issuing of health advisories has had some drastic effects on the enjoyment of this and other lakes and the process needs to be improved.

This past winter, Grandview made a submission to Alberta Health representing the municipalities of Pigeon Lake and also the Association of Summer Villages of Alberta; so nearly all of the recreational lakes in Alberta. The thrust of the submission was that when health advisories were issued, they basically killed all enjoyment of the lake as Albertans were being frightened from using our lakes; to say nothing about business and property values.

Yet we know from scientific studies that Pigeon Lake, as well as most other prairie lakes, has always had cyanobacteria and will continue to have it. For many years before AHS started to measure cell counts and toxin levels, which I should point out toxins have only rarely exceed,

only once, the WHO guideline, Albertans safely used our lakes with only a degree of common sense being the guide, and no one ever died.

So my proposal to the Chief Medical Officer was to continue to take measurements at our beaches and to close a beach if fecal coliforms or the toxin level exceeded the health guidelines but otherwise, let the basis of the program be: **Education, Caution and Self-responsibility**. Provide guidance in what to look for and what blue green algae is, advise of caution in using the water including advice to rinse after coming out and, most importantly, the responsibility should be with the individual. Also requested was to address some of the root causes of the problem and give support for efforts to change the waste water regulations concerning septic fields.

The risks of going to the beach include traffic accidents, sun burns, drowning, getting cut with glass, lightning strikes and way down the list is the risk of being killed from blue green algae. A proportional response is needed for this natural occurrence.

The Chief Medical Officer understands our concerns and is continuing to review the situation with a promise of change.

By the way, the Editor in Chief of the Edmonton Journal has promised me that it will no longer use misleading photographs!

My Recommendation

It has often been said that when you don't like what is being said, change the conversation. The message that Albertans are getting about Pigeon Lake is that it is a slime bucket and that we can't go in the water. But that is just not the case. Sure we must take cautions as with most aspects of nature: mountain climbing, boating, alligator wrestling. But still we have the right to enjoy our lake. And there are many great things about our lake which we can talk about.

About 4 years ago, I made a presentation to the Chamber as well as others, about branding Pigeon Lake as a Special Place in order to counteract the negative press. I believed, and still do, that if we advertise Pigeon Lake as something special, and if we can rally the residents, the municipal governments, the schools and the businesses at our lake to show their commitment and their love of our lake, we will be able to counteract these negatives. There are other jurisdictions where the residents fiercely protect the environment under their care – just try to cut down a tree in North Vancouver or strip a shoreline on the eastern seaboard! That is what we need to have at Pigeon Lake.

I had suggested that we all operate under the banner of "Pigeon Lake, a Special Place" on our signs, on our letterhead and in our advertising. It was quite amazing to hear all of the reasons why we couldn't do this.

But ask any of the many children who enjoy their summers at the lake if it is a special place and you will see the passion that people have for our lake. I still maintain that we all should be wearing T-shirts saying “**Pigeon Lake, a special place**’: Something to show that we are united and that we care.

A few years ago, I started “Love the Lake”. This is a group of lake residents who made a commitment to protect the lake through proper stewardship actions such as not using fertilizers, protecting the shoreline and so on. You can see their Love the Lake emblem proudly displayed on their properties all around the lake. It is my goal, before I die, to have everyone in the watershed displaying one of these emblems.

I have often said how powerful a message it would be to read in the Edmonton Journal that all Pigeon Lake residents are fighting back and banning fertilizers around the lake or taking some other united action instead of the usual headlines advising us not to go in the water. That is the type of publicity we need; something positive that we have achieved.

We don’t need to develop the passion; we need to build on it – it’s already there. Unless we show the rest of Alberta that we are being protective of our lake and that we love our lake, we will have to learn to live with the same old ridicule.

Pigeon Lake is a special place!

Thank you.

Don Davidson,
Mayor, Summer Village of Grandview