



ELK RIVER CHAIN OF LAKES SOCIAL SURVEY FACT SHEET

Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council conducted three mail surveys in the Elk River Chain of Lakes (ERCOL) Watershed during 2017-2019 with Watershed Residents, Shoreline Property Owners, and Local Officials. These were done to identify needs and concerns regarding the water quality of lakes in the chain. The results will help guide future efforts to protect the water quality of the Watershed.

Watershed Residents Survey, October-December 2017

Sent: 932; received responses: 233 = 25% return

The majority of the 233 responses came from homeowners, with less than 1% responding that they are renters. The majority lived in an isolated, rural, non-farm residence, followed by those who lived in a town, village, or city. 66% were male, 34% female. Most respondents were in the age range of mid-50s to mid-70s.

Local Officials Survey, March-June 2018

Sent: 246; received responses: 74 = 30% return

Of the 74 responses, 57% were male, 43% female. Most respondents were in the age range of late-50s to early-70s. 53% were elected officials, 34% were Planning Commissioners, and 13% served on Zoning Boards of Appeal. The majority of respondents were township officials at 54%, followed by 32% from villages and 14% from the county.

Shoreline Property Owners Survey, November 2018 – March 2019

Sent: 807; received responses: 323 = 40% return

The 323 responses came from homeowners who live here both year-round and for some part of the year: 44% of responses were from people who live here as their primary residence, and 56% use this home as a secondary residence. 65% were male, 35% female. Most respondents were in the age range of mid-50s to mid-70s.

RESULTS

In all three surveys, watershed residents, shoreline property owners, and local officials all believe:

- ✓ Quality of our water is "good"
- ✓ There are few watershed impairments
- ✓ Economic stability depends on good water quality
- ✓ Not okay to reduce water quality to promote economic development
- ✓ Quality of life in their community depends on good water quality – lakes, rivers streams

- Watershed residents, shoreline property owners, and local officials have very positive attitudes about the value of water quality in the ERCOL Watershed. They strongly agree that both economic development and quality of life depends on good water quality.
- All three groups viewed invasive aquatic plants and animals as the biggest problem. For watershed residents, this was followed by concerns over sedimentation in the water. Shoreline property owners were next worried about Phosphorus. Local officials were next concerned about sedimentation.
- Watershed residents are willing to make changes to their lawn and garden practices, and perceive few limitations to doing so. Regarding fertilizer instructions, if it was relevant to use on their property, 43% of watershed residents said they are currently using them. 75% said they are willing to try this practice or already do so. There were no significant factors limiting their ability to implement this practice.
- For watershed residents who have septic systems, 58% stated they have their systems pumped every 3-5 years to remove sludge, effluent, and scum from the tank. 77% either already use this practice or are willing to try it. Unfortunately, the watershed residents do not see a need for septic system oversight by either the Health Department or local governments. When asked if a local government agency should handle inspection and maintenance of septic systems, 58% said no; 19% said yes; and 23% did not know.
- By contrast, shoreline property owners were much more open to oversight by the Health Department or local governments. 66% said they would like a reminder to inspect and maintain septic systems; 33% said no; and 1% did not know.
- Local officials were opposed to Health Department oversight, but more open to local government oversight, answering 34% yes; 44% no; 22% did not know.
- Since 86% of septic system owners have not had problems, the prevailing attitude is that things are fine. However, given the research done on this topic by the Watershed Council over the past few years, this is a topic in need of education. Watershed residents and local officials generally need more information on septic system health and oversight.
- Riparian Buffer Maintenance is a practice for shorelines, so it is not unexpected that some watershed residents are unaware of this. For shoreline property owners, riparian buffer maintenance is more familiar. 56% said they currently use it. Only 5% said they are unwilling to try this practice, meaning broad outreach and education efforts should have a good chance of succeeding.
- Even though cooperation between governmental units has been promoted by organizations and agencies, only 24% of local officials reported that they knew how to coordinate their water quality zoning provisions with neighboring communities, and just 27% indicated that their community uses the practice. Local officials reported that the top barriers to changing planning and zoning practices to protect water quality are resistance to new regulations, concern about economic impacts, expense to develop new regulations, and approval by community residents. Public engagement throughout the process may help reduce those barriers.