

BY SARAH SMITH

ssmith@parkrapidsenterprise.com

The average age of lake activists is 65+ and a new study commissioned for Hubbard County COLA recommends recruiting younger people to carry on the fight for clean lakes.

Perpetuation of lake associations is crucial to lake health, the study found.

"When more residents are engaged and involved in best practices in their everyday actions, then lake quality and membership in lake associations will benefit," a summary of the findings indicated.

The report was prepared for COLA by Indiana University of Public Affairs and Environmental Affairs Masters Capstone Course, taught by Big Mantrap resident Burney Fischer, a recent Indiana transplant to Hubbard County.

Only summaries have been released to date. The study sought to answer how COLA actions, and those of lake associations, affect public images of those organizations, what was the best way to get people to engage in best practices of lake management and what was the best method of recruiting and retaining membership of those organizations.

Public image, membership and water quality engagement were the study's overriding themes.

"COLA and LAs (lake associations) are viewed positively by LA members," the findings said. "Aquatic invasive species are (a) common problem; improved lake conditions are correlated with both higher property values on lakes and the presence of LAs; people residing on lakes for six months or more are most likely to be involved with LAs and become engaged in water quality-related activities... management and succession of leadership are important issues; and residents over the age of

50 may be more likely to volunteer," the study concluded.

In discussing the study at its monthly meeting last week, COLA members stressed the importance of drawing up and following lake management plans, promoting the "Clean, Drain and Dry" campaigns that educate boaters in keeping live wells uncontaminated on boats, publicizing the use of shoreland buffers and distributing more "Restore the Shore" guides and taking out ads that reflect good lake practices.

"Our goal is to stay non-political," said member Larry Roberts. He said there's a public misperception "that we're stopping them from what they want to do" with regard to lakeshore development.

But the study says state and local governments have a vested interest in maintaining property values as they relate to clean water issues, and COLA members have been pressuring for changes in Hubbard County's Board of Adjustment meetings. Those changes are occurring. Environmental Services Officer Eric Buitenwerf is exerting more control and input into board decisions. COLA members want the BOA to listen to him more.

State lawmakers are heeding the call. In a recent letter to the editor, Rep. Roger Erickson, DFL - Baudette, stressed the importance of everyone's participation in the AIS issue.

COLA's website is undergoing a transformation and it is looking to social media to reach out to prospective new members. The students that conducted the survey are working on a Facebook page.

Both lake association members and COLA members surveyed rated Aquatic Invasive Species a top priority. "Expanding involvement to all lake residents and lake users in helping restore, maintain and improve water

quality by stopping the spread of aquatic invasive species and reducing property runoff would help to achieve the highest-cited goal in the COLA survey," a summation stated.

Priorities differed with the two groups as to whether shoreline development and understanding shoreline issues were the most pressing issues. Interestingly, lake associations surveyed said lack of volunteers was a major concern, while COLA members surveyed didn't see participation, or lack of it, as a downfall.

Lake association members were more likely to be concerned about fisheries management on their individual lakes than COLA members rated the issue. And lake association members surveyed were more apt to be concerned about agricultural runoff into their lakes than COLA members were.

Differences in perception of COLA activities were discussed as COLA sought to get a handle on its public image. In general, lake associations sampled had a favorable view of COLA by 69 percent, but the study acknowledged "COLA's public image is a major concern of the COLA reps, but does not appear in the views of lake residents."

But the study suggests tapping the youth movement through outreach to schools and 4-H programs and continuing education to keep kids involved.

Lake association members from 8th and 9th Crow Wing, Big Mantrap, Little Sand, Long, Middle (Crow Wings), Palmer and Potato lakes answered the survey.

Details of the study will eventually be released as information dribbles out and is digested by each individual lake association.

COLA members viewed the overall report positively, with opportunities for improvement suggested.

Most importantly, the report and study reinforces the

theory that COLA has been doing the right thing all along, and should continue along its current path.