

# Chapter 2

## Starting a Lake Organization

Congratulations – you have decided to dedicate some time and effort to your lake! If you are part of a lake community, your life encompasses some exceptional advantages. Lake living also comes with some unique responsibilities. Dealing with the broad range of issues and concerns that face our lakes can be an overwhelming task for an individual. Working with an organized group whose members share objectives, knowledge, skills and resources can make short work out of the most difficult problems.



### Introduction

This chapter will walk you through all of the practical steps needed to form a lake organization, from deciding whether or not to organize to actually holding your initial informational meetings. Lake districts have certain legal requirements that lake associations do not (*lake districts are described in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5*). No matter which type of organization you have decided upon, the following advice will help assure the formation of your organization goes smoothly. This section reviews basic considerations, logistics and skills that will help when trying to bring a diverse group together.



### Why Start an Organization?

From the start, any organization must have a purpose. Lake organizations are no different. Here are some reasons to form a lake organization in your community:

- Gain awareness of your neighbors' lake interests
- Develop a relationship with your lake neighbors
- Develop a relationship with units of government, state agencies and institutes charged with the management of lakes
- Develop a communications network for sharing lake information.
- Raise awareness of lake issues in the community
- Raise funds and apply for grants to preserve and protect the lake
- Develop a long-range lake management plan
- Act as a support group for members
- Focus the wide range of skills and know-how that a lake group possesses
- Gain support from numbers. The group's opinions and needs can be more effectively represented to local government officials or agencies
- Gather information and present educational programs for your membership and those living near the lake
- Conduct data collection programs covering a broad range of lake concerns (i.e. water quality, development, lake use conflicts, etc.)

- Gain a historical perspective from long-time residents
- Network with other lake organizations
- Assure the lake will be in good shape for generations to come
- Address ecological concerns around the lake



## Considerations

If your lake has more than one landowner or user, you will probably find a divergence in philosophy and expectations over how the lake should be used or managed. It is a good idea to encourage and solicit these diverse ideas. Organizations formed for a single purpose or over a single issue rarely enjoy long-term success. Once that single issue is addressed or resolved, members may quickly lose interest and the organization may lose momentum.

Bring together those interested in your lake and ask them about their ideas and concerns. This list will often be broad, but having a wide interest base will build ownership for the issues and can help sustain an organization. Remember, an organization requires good management to prioritize the many issues in a satisfactory manner and to develop a sense of achievement.



### **An organization with the best chances of success:**

- Has an eye toward the future
- Recognizes a broad range of issues and requirements
- Anticipates unforeseen occurrences that could change the lake
- Listens to others
- Encourages participation and diverse ideas
- Has respect for other viewpoints
- Balances the needs of today's lake community against the possibilities of tomorrow's
- Collaborates with other lake organizations
- Is well organized and managed

### Where Do You Start?

Your success at organizing your lake neighbors may well depend on your talent as a communicator and negotiator. Be transparent! Make sure everyone with an interest has an opportunity to find out what is going on and understands the implications.

## Do Your Homework

Contact your county UW-Extension Educator, the UW-Extension Lakes Program at UW-Stevens Point, your Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) Lakes Coordinator, or the Wisconsin Association of Lakes (WAL) to assist you. *See Appendix E for lake contacts.*

## Unearth the History of Your Lake

- Are there any existing groups that represent lake interests?
- Have there ever been other lake organizations? If yes, what happened to them? Who were the officers? Do these folks still live at the lake?
- Have there been major management or research projects on the lake (fish stocking, aquatic plant harvesting)? Who was involved?
- Are there any government agencies or institutions involved in management projects on your lake?
- Are there any groups with a substantial interest in the management of the lake (resorts, lodges, marinas, industry, local government, large landowners, boaters, anglers)?
- Are there any political situations or prominent issues (development, use conflicts, plant harvesting) affecting your lake?

## Recognize Differences

- If you are a “newcomer” (0-10 years of living on a lake), be sensitive to the views of people that have been on the lake for many years.
- Be aware of user groups in your watershed that may impact or benefit from the lake (resorts, industry, agriculture, etc.).
- Be sensitive to the distinctive requirements of year-round and seasonal residents.
- Be sensitive to various non-resident user groups and their expectations (boaters, anglers, seasonal users, park users, birdwatchers).
- Listen to other’s viewpoints and try to see the lake through their eyes.

## Before the First Informational Meeting

- Assemble a nucleus of interested people. Try for a broad representation of people (a year-round resident, a long-time resident, a representative of any special interest groups) who live on or near the lake. Include anybody who wants to assist in the effort, and remember, the more people involved the better. (Your county UW-Extension Educator is often trained to help with this sort of endeavor.)
- List the reasons a lake organization would benefit the lake.
- Consider possible objections of an organization and how to address them.
- Gather information on issues or problems and potential solutions. This will aid in recruiting additional interested persons.

- Make sure you understand the specifics and ramifications of having a lake organization. Contact a lake professional through your county UW-Extension Educator, a UW-Extension Lakes Specialist, a WDNR Lakes Coordinator or a WAL representative who can explain the details. *See Appendix E for lake contacts.*
- Let your town and county officials know that you are considering forming a lake organization. Lake districts require participation by local government and it is wise to engage local government officials at whatever level they want to be involved. The support of local officials can be indispensable and play a positive role in your effort, so start building a relationship early.
- You may need some seed money for photocopying/printing and postage. People may consider “chipping in” some start-up money or you may consider asking some interested person or supportive business or organization (resort, chamber of commerce or other local business) to donate office support. Caution is advised if you accept help from a group that may be perceived as having a personal interest or other motive that might be contrary to your organization’s long-term interests, as the acceptance of such help may create an expectation of future support.
- If you are aware of a lake organization on a nearby lake, contact them for ideas on how they were created and how they operate (*see the Wisconsin Lake List Directory for a list of lake organizations and contacts at [www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes/lakelist](http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes/lakelist)*).

## Preparing for the First Informational Meeting

Develop a plan for getting the information to the entire lake community. The amount and the expense of the effort needed will depend on the size of the lake and the number of people you need to reach. Be transparent with your information, allowing anyone that wants to help or comment to join in.

## Three Months or More Before the Meeting

- Many groups begin by inviting lake professionals to speak, such as UW-Extension Lake Specialists, WAL representatives, county Land & Water Conservation staff, WDNR staff and others (*See Appendix E for lake contacts*). When planning an inaugural meeting you may also want to invite a representative from a neighboring lake organization.
- Select a time and day that does not conflict with other events and provides for good attendance by the people in your lake community. Summer is often the time to reach the greatest number of residents.
- Reserve a convenient location. A public place is best, like the town hall, a resort or school.
- Invite everyone living at and near your lake. Use tax rolls to develop your list; they are open to the public at reasonable times. (The town/county treasurer or clerk may help you get started.)
- Invite those groups that use the lake but may not be property owners, such as businesses, bird watchers, angling groups and water ski clubs.

## One Month Before the Meeting

- Prepare an agenda noting time, place, date and subject to be discussed.
- Publicize the meeting.
- Prepare a news release for your local newspaper and buyers guide. Most papers are happy to print such notices. Send it out early (a month before the meeting is typical).
- Try to place a Public Service Announcement (PSA) on your local radio or TV station.
- Put posters in local grocery stores, community centers, sport stores, etc.
- Mail or email personal invitations to certain potential key members of the community. If your budget can afford it, send personal invitations to everyone.
- Post large signs (with permission) at strategic locations (road intersections, around the lake) announcing the meeting and welcoming the public.

## At the First Informational Meeting

The size of the group and your time frame will determine what you can accomplish at the meeting. If the group is small (20-30), you may have the opportunity to hear from everyone. If the group is larger (30-60), there may not be time to hear from each person. Try and make sure that anyone who wants to be heard has the chance to be heard.

- Inspect the venue and meeting logistics (i.e. number of chairs, A/V equipment, food, drinks, light switches, paper, pencils, parking, darkening the room, refreshments, etc.). Do this inspection far enough before the meeting starts to correct any deficiencies.
- Have extra copies of the agenda.
- Have a sign-in sheet for names and addresses and provide name tags.
- Start on time and stay on schedule.
- Introduce yourself, your committee and any guest speakers.
- Explain why you feel there is a need for an organization.
- Ask people to share why they enjoy living on the lake and what they see as issues important to them.
- Allow plenty of time for questions and answers and getting feedback.
- Let people know that anyone at the meeting and those people interested in lakes are welcome to sign up to receive Wisconsin's lake newsletter, Lake Tides, at no cost in hard copy or electronic format. Send or email a list of addresses and email addresses to UW-Extension Lakes at 800 Reserve Street, UW-Stevens Point, Stevens Point, WI 54881 or [uwexplakes@uwsp.edu](mailto:uwexplakes@uwsp.edu).

## Confirmation

- After all the information has been presented and all the questions have been satisfactorily answered, you will need to confirm the desires of the group to move forward on the formation of an association or a district.
- You may want to take a straw vote. If the group decides to form an association, elect temporary officers and agree on a date for a first annual meeting. If your group is considering a lake district, the process is more complex and must follow certain legal requirements (*see Chapters 4 and 5*).
- If the group is not sold on the idea of forming an organization, you may choose to form an ad-hoc committee to explore the idea further, answer questions that may have come up or set up another informational meeting.
- If enough people are interested, you could also opt to form an association among those who agree with the idea and seek to include others as the association grows into the future. (This would not hold true with a lake district.)
- If there is little interest (less than 40% of those attending) you may consider dropping the idea entirely. The process can always be repeated at another time.



## Guiding Principles

Once a lake organization is formed there are many good things you can accomplish. Following these guiding principals may help your mission be successful:

- Remember the waters of Wisconsin belong to all of us. Their management sometimes becomes a balancing act between what is good for the lake ecosystem and the rights and demands of the public and those who own property on the water's edge.
- Think long-term and big picture for the lake. What we leave for others should be more important than "what is in it for me."
- Be transparent. Make sure whatever you do as an organization is open to everyone interested in the lake. Strive to make sure that if anybody wants to know about your organization they can find information easily. Invite and encourage participation.
- Listen to all those interested in the lake. Even if you disagree with people, they deserve to be heard and respected.
- Work toward building good relationships with local units of government, state government officials, businesses and community leaders. Let them know what you are about and what you would like to do for the lake. Build trust.