

If the County chooses to lease the Somerset Lake property, management, maintenance, and operation of the property and its facilities will fall on the County. It is recommended that the County place the "new" park under the jurisdiction of the Somerset County Parks and Recreation Board. The County will need to allocate new funds for maintenance and operation of the park. The Consultant estimates that the annual cost of operation of the Park through the first five years of the lease will range from \$60,000 to \$85,000. As the Park is further developed, additional expenses will be incurred. The County should look to offset their costs of operation through the use of volunteers and donations of time and supplies. A "Friends of Somerset County Parks" should be created as the organization to recruit and manage volunteers and raise money for both development and operation of the Park. These types of groups have been successful in many communities to assist local government in offsetting the cost of operating their parks.

Funding Capital Improvements

It is likely that more than one source of funding will be needed to develop Somerset Lake Park. Typically the primary sources of construction funding are grants, local tax dollars, and private contributions.

Funding is available through a variety of different sources for construction of recreation facilities. It is very important that a specific funding plan be developed. A balanced and creative approach should be taken in deciding which financial options best fit Somerset County's needs. Making use of a series of funding sources provides a number of creative options for financing that allow the County to leverage funding from one source against another.

IS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOMERSET LAKE FEASIBLE FOR SOMERSET COUNTY?

If Somerset County officials are in favor of improving and enhancing recreational opportunities available to County residents, this project makes good sense. The County' Comprehensive Plan establishes as one of its key goals to "Promote the development of recreation and natural resource based tourism industries. Two of the implementation strategies identified to accomplish the goal are to:

- Promote natural resources as an economic advantage to companies, and
- Develop regional community parks

Somerset Lake should be prized as one of the crown jewels of the County. While the PFBC has a strong interest in maintaining it as a fishing and boating location, it is not likely that they will develop it beyond that purpose. County residents have indicated a desire to see environmentally sensitive development at the Lake that will enhance its usability, promote its conservation,

Implementation of the proposed master site plan and associated lease provides the following benefits:

PFBC

- Attracts new potential fishing and boating users to the Lake creating additional revenues for the Commission.
- Reduces maintenance and operating costs at the site.
- Frees up PFBC monies currently being used at the site to be redirected for fishing and boating purposes.
- Allows PFBC staff to focus their efforts more strategically on fishing and boating.
- Enhances the role of the PFBC in the lives of all Pennsylvanians.
- Strengthens the cooperation with local groups in the Somerset area as they feel a sense of partnership with the PFBC.

SOMERSET COUNTY

- Provides expanded recreational opportunities for County residents.
- Offers Somerset County residents their first County-owned Community Park.
- Responds to the recreational demands of County residents as identified in the public input process conducted as part of this study.
- Establishes a long-term commitment by the County to the provision of parks and recreation.
- Allows the County to provide a significant park site without having to spend money to purchase the property.

and protect its resources. The Master Site Plan developed as part of this Study accomplishes all three.

There will certainly be some challenges in making this happen. First, the project must meet the standards and restrictions of the PFBC. Second, the County and the PFBC must come to terms on a lease for the property. Third, The County must come up with the funding needed for both development and operations. None of these challenges will be easily overcome. They will require the long-term commitment of the County Commissioners and the unending support of County residents. If the County is willing to stay the course to develop Somerset Lake into a first rate facility fishing, boating and outdoor recreation facility, Somerset County residents will be the beneficiaries of a truly unequalled County park .

SOMERSET LAKE PARK FEASIBILITY STUDY AND MASTER PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to determine if it is feasible and desirable for the County to use the 457 acre Somerset Lake property, owned by the Commonwealth and currently managed by the PFBC, for a regional park. The County envisions expanded recreational opportunities as well as the potential for new or expanded habitats for wildlife. Toward that end, the tasks for this project include the development of a master plan for the park, based on public input and an assessment of existing features. Then, a study of various management options will be reviewed along with estimating potential costs for development and maintenance of the park. Once the assessment is complete, the County Commissioners will have the information they need to make a decision on whether to discuss management and development responsibilities for Somerset lake Park with the PFBC.

PARK MASTER PLANNING PROCESS

Pashek Associates utilizes a planning process that is based on the input of residents in Somerset County and other stakeholders. This public input process included meetings with a study committee of knowledgeable users and neighbors of the Lake. Public meetings were held to gather input from residents and to begin to prioritize the needs of the community. Key people in the community were contacted along with the distribution of a questionnaire to a random sample of residents in the County. This input was used to develop recommendations that specifically address the needs of Somerset County.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are summary recommendations regarding the development of the park land and the potential transfer of management for the park from the PFBC to the County.

Somerset Lake Park Master Plan

Through a variety of public input venues, several key issues were raised. Park development must include provisions for protecting and improving wildlife habitat for birding, fishing and hunting. Walking for exercise and having greater access to the beautiful lake perimeter is important and serves residents of all ages. The existing facilities, like the boat launches and picnic areas are worth preserving. They have, however, been allowed to deteriorate and very much need updating and improving. Finally, there was interest in providing a modest structure for nature interpretation, including a classroom and display area.

Phasing of the Improvements

The first step is to negotiate a lease or other arrangement between the County and the PFBC.

Phase I and II would include the construction of the trail around the lake. This would add to the recreational opportunities of the existing park facilities and create improved fishing and birding opportunities. Each trail phase would cost about \$640,000 each.

Phase III involves rebuilding the park entrance road, including utilities, and improvements to the PFBC office area, costing about \$555,000. This would begin to address the lack of recent investment in the park by the PFBC and improve access to the Lake from the office.

Phase IV would upgrade the present main boat access area including parking and improvements to the support facilities at the boat launch, for a cost of about \$645,000.

Phase V includes improving and adding facilities at the large Picnic area and Trail head.



The Master Plan includes the following recommended park facilities:

Lake Trail - Construct a limestone trail around the lake, providing expanded fishing and birding access. Include boardwalks on the east side where the trail crosses wetland areas and interpretive signage.

Main Park Entrance and Road - Realign the existing entrance road and provide for an attractive entrance sign and entrance plantings.

PFBC Regional Office Area - Extend and cover the existing fishing pier, provide picnic tables.

Maintenance Area - Provide a shed for maintenance needs.

Main Boat Access Area - Reconfigure the boat launch area and trailer parking to be more efficient, widen and extend the existing boat launch, provide an area for a concessionaire to rent boats, canoes and kayaks, and develop new parking.

Trail Head/Large Picnic Area/ Nature Center - Provide parking, picnic shelter, playground, restrooms, nature center, picnic tables and grills and trail access.

Small Picnic Grove - Add parking, a picnic shelter picnic tables and grills along with trail access.

Siemons Lake Access - Provide a picnic shelter, covered ADA fishing pier, and trail access across from Siemons nursing home.

Secondary Boat Access - Improve the existing lot, add a pull-off for birding, regrade and extend the existing boat launch, add racks for canoes and kayaks, restrooms, picnic shelter, covered picnic tables and trail access.

Trail/Fishing/Birding Access (Mallard Road) - Expand and improve parking and provide trail access.

Trail/Fishing/Birding Access (Lake Road) - Provide a picnic shelter, picnic tables and grills, parking, trail access around the lake and the beginning of a trail connection to the Borough.

Forestry Management/Succession Areas - Establish and manage native meadow, shrub, and forest areas representing early to late succession species to promote a diversity of wildlife habitat, increase opportunities for environmental interpretation, and create a variety of interesting spaces for park users.

These improvements, including restrooms and picnic facilities would cost about \$655,000.

Phase VI would be to construct or upgrade the remaining fishing access points around the lake at a cost of about \$550,000.

Phases VII and VIII complete the master plan by adding the nature center at the large picnic area, build the maintenance facility and a small picnic grove, finish the road, and provide additional landscaping. These phases will cost about \$860,000.

THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

The primary goal of the Feasibility Study is to determine if management of the land surrounding the lake should be transferred from the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission (PFBC) to Somerset County. Key Issues include the method of transfer, costs for maintaining and developing the park property and the role of the PFBC with regard to the lake, the dam and land they currently occupy for their offices and maintenance equipment.

Lake Somerset is a 253-acre impoundment owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and managed by the PA Fish and Boat Commission for public fishing and boating. The Commission's Southwest Region office is located at the lake. The nature of existing ownership and management inherently places a number of restrictions on the property. Additionally, because the property has been developed using federal grant funds, federal regulations place additional limitations on the property.

The PFBC has indicated that it is their intent to maintain its Regional Office in its current location at Somerset Lake regardless of future development of other portions of the property or changes in management of the property. The portion of property surrounding the current office and maintenance buildings will need to remain available to the PFBC. The exact size of the parcel will need to be negotiated as part of any agreement. The PFBC also requires that there be free public fishing and boating access to Lake Somerset and to all improvements made during its management of the property.

Based on the master site plan developed for the property, the Consultant believes that a lease arrangement for the entire property surrounding the lake would best serve both the County and the PFBC. The PFBC should maintain continued responsibility for the lake itself, which would include both hatchery and impoundment needs. Somerset County should carefully consider the financial and liability ramifications of accepting responsibility for either the lake or the impoundment.

