

Shoreland Zoning in Wisconsin: A Step Backward

Six years of debate, multiple public hearings and some 50,000 comments from citizens of diverse backgrounds led to a major revision Wisconsin's shoreland zoning standards in 2010.

This package, called NR115, updated rules that had protected our waters since the 1960s. It set statewide minimum standards to safeguard the water quality, fish and wildlife habitat and scenic beauty of lakes and rivers. Provisions included minimum lot sizes, building setbacks from the water's edge, and standards for amounts of impervious surfaces (such as roofs and driveways) that increase runoff.

Meanwhile, counties could make their shoreland zoning rules more protective than the state standards if they saw fit; many counties did so. Key management practices included controlling development density and creating natural buffer strips at the water's edge.

Then came the state budget process of 2015. In July, the Joint Finance Committee added a provision to the biennial budget bill forbidding counties from enacting zoning rules more restrictive than NR115. Traditionally, changes of this size are considered over weeks of open debate. Instead, this law was added to the budget at the last minute, outside normal legislative channels, leaving no chance for public discussion. Called Act 55, it was later signed into law with the budget bill. The impacts could be profound:

- **The one-size-fits-all regulation ignored vast difference in counties' lake and river resources.**
- **The law took away local control of shoreland development.**
- **It forced counties that already had more protective zoning rules to abandon them in favor of state minimum standards. That negated years of effort and overruled the wishes of local officials and citizens.**
- **Lake protections such as vegetative buffers, minimum frontages and lot sizes, setbacks, runoff mitigation, shoreland lighting, and others were severely weakened.**
- **Northern Wisconsin counties were hurt the most because our lakes and rivers are essential to quality of life and the backbone of a multi-million-dollar tourism industry.**

Act 55 severely undermined local control and water-quality protection. It serves narrow interests for short-term gains. It could result in serious and lasting damage to the water resources Wisconsin residents hold dear.

One in a series of articles sponsored by the Oneida County Lakes and Rivers Association (www.oclra.org). For more information, contact Bob Martini at 715-282-5896 or email to webmaster@oclra.org. OCLRA encourages the use and distribution of this material by lake associations, their members, and other parties concerned about water quality.

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closest to the
people serves the
people best."
—Thomas Jefferson*

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