



## Chautauqua Current No. 2

Chautauqua Lake & Watershed Management Alliance, Inc.

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*Figure 1. A Town of Chautauqua Mobotrac offloads to a Chautauqua Lake Association vessel during 2021 in-lake maintenance joint operations.*

## **MONEY MATTERS**

### **FUNDING FACTORS IN LAKE MAINTENANCE**

Where does the money come from? There is an incredible amount of work being done to manage and maintain Chautauqua Lake and its watershed, but what about the funding? To answer this question, it may be helpful to narrow our view a bit and look at one specific area of work. In-lake maintenance is a great place to start, given the significant public demand for yearly management of plants in the water (also known as macrophytes) and near-shore cleanup.

Our lake is enriched in nutrients, which help fuel productive populations of plants and algae. Our lake is also large – over 13,000 acres spanning 17 miles from tip to tip with approximately 42 miles of shoreline and a littoral zone (shallow areas where sunlight penetration aids plant growth) of around 4,224 acres. Like plowing snow in the winter, in-lake plant management is done to maintain the lake for its variety of uses and users during the recreational season. Each year, the lion's share of local dollars routed via the Alliance goes to support a combined in-lake maintenance program that consists primarily of three major types of work. These are: mechanical harvesting of plants, chemical treatments using herbicides aimed

at two invasive plant species, and near-shore cleanup. There are other in-lake maintenance actions such as dredging that are deployed occasionally within the lake, but for now we can focus on those that are often used on an annual basis.

The Chautauqua Lake Association first began mechanical harvesting operations in 1952, and continues its harvesting program to this day in addition to providing near-shore cleanup of debris and plant material along with other services related to invasive species programs and monitoring. Since 2020, CLA crews have performed joint cleanup operations in partnership with the Town of Chautauqua's Mobitracs. Recent additions to the lake maintenance toolbox, Mobitracs are small floating barges with lifting rakes and tracks that can work both on land and in the water.

The documented use of herbicides to manage certain species of plants in the lake's littoral zone dates back to 1955 according to the County's *Chautauqua Lake Macrophyte Management Strategy*, while reports of steamships or others deploying chemical treatments date back even further (to perhaps the late-1800s). Methods and materials have varied as environmental regulation has evolved, and the most-recent period of use began in 2017. Since then, herbicide treatments undertaken to manage the invasive plants Eurasian watermilfoil and curly-leaf pondweed have been pursued by some towns and villages, often in coordination with the Chautauqua Lake Partnership. These treatments are subject to New York State Department of Environmental Conservation permitting and regulation, with individual towns and villages acting as the permit applicants. If permits are approved, the towns and villages, in coordination with the CLP, contract with a licensed applicator who performs these treatments at prescribed areas within the lake. Typically, herbicide permits are granted by NYSDEC based on anticipated levels of target invasive plant growth, but the performance of the treatments are subject to NYSDEC confirmation at the time of treatment that the actual levels of growth warrant the management.

These three core in-lake maintenance activities are supported by a number of different financial pillars. An important challenge for stakeholders is building out this underlying structure of funding support, since some pillars are a better fit for certain projects than others. With that in mind, let's start by looking at a pillar that is sometimes a less-than-perfect fit for these high-priority annual activities.

A common source of funding for water-related projects is the New York State Consolidated Funding Application—one source of what some call 'state money.' The majority of these funds are steered towards watershed-based solutions to lake impairments, such as stream stabilization, stormwater retrofits, wastewater, and green infrastructure projects to combat nutrient and sediment loading. Complementary to the NYSCFA, the state has also funded certain lake organizations directly through its annual budget process. While extremely impactful, this funding avenue can be difficult to predict from year to year. Due to the demand for in-lake maintenance, and the relative lack of state grant funding available, the Alliance has directed the majority of its annual support from local foundations and Chautauqua County (via the Occupancy Tax Program) to perform this critical work. These two pillars, funds from the county and foundations, are often better suited to support in-lake annual work than the state funding pillar.

In addition to state, county, and charitable foundation funding, management programs are also supported by individual contributions. Both the CLA and CLP are not-for-profit organizations that fundraise for lake management activities through the contributions of private citizens, businesses, and organizations. These are critical sources of funding which work in tandem with foundation, county, and

state funding to achieve the overall goal of improving the lake. Generally, this pillar of funding is very versatile, as donors can direct money at their own discretion.

That brings us to our final funding pillar of in-lake maintenance—investments by towns and villages. Those with an interest in these yearly programs can choose to direct money from their own budgets, contributing a slice to this collaborative funding pie. Towns and villages may choose to submit applications to the NYSDEC for herbicide treatments, and can contribute their own funding for these and other lake maintenance programs. Despite their differences, it is important to note that all of these sources of funding share a common incentive—they all benefit from the health and usability of the lake.

Achieving the funding goals of yearly in-lake maintenance is not an easy needle to thread. The generosity and commitment of local charitable foundations, the county, and others cannot be overstated. In response, we should proactively strive for improvements in an effort to meet the changing, and often growing, needs of the lake and its stakeholders. Financial sustainability via new or diversified funding sources, along with betterment of existing practices to improve efficiency and effectiveness, are key objectives. One way to pursue these goals is to look for additional financial pillars to help support what is already in place. Looking outward – to lakes elsewhere in New York or even beyond – could reveal possible solutions. These could include certain use fees for boats entering the lake from public launches or fees for docks. The potential establishment of a new district for the protection and improvement of the lake is also being evaluated locally by the Chautauqua Lake Protection and Rehabilitation Agency.

As we utilize a long-term perspective to inform short-term actions, a set of architectural challenges is clear. All of these financial pillars must be erected and organized by the parties involved in preparation for the maintenance season. The organization of funds must also be adaptable, taking into account all of the variables that determine yearly plant growth and a host of administrative and logistical factors. There are important time constraints, economic variables, and decision-making steps along the way that different stakeholders must navigate. These different pillars are all built to support a structure of work that has to stand up to the elements, if you will. Structures need to be designed so that they can sway in the wind and not leak in the rain. The financial scaffolding of a combined lake work plan must also be built with similar care.