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### **SUSTAINING THE ROAD AHEAD FOR CHAUTAUQUA LAKE**

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Different stakeholders seem to have arrived at some similar conclusions now that the Chautauqua Lake Protection and Rehabilitation Agency has voted not to recommend the formation of a special lake tax district to the County Legislature. There appears to be a sort of consensus brewing based on certain public statements and other discussions—that consensus being that we *still need* to prioritize, fund, and implement the annual maintenance programs that aim to improve lake conditions. However, the recent Agency development begs another question. What options remain to sustainably fund the work to be done?

To start, let's look at what we *do have* in place. Since around 2018 a key role of the Alliance has been to implement a consolidated local funding program that primarily supports in-lake maintenance programs on a yearly basis. Using funds largely provided by local charitable foundations and Chautauqua County (via occupancy tax), this program funds a large share of the annual work, which includes things like mechanical harvesting, chemical treatments aimed at two invasive plant species, near-shore cleanup, and the management/monitoring of newer invasive species. Longer-term work in the watershed such as stream stabilization and municipal sewer extension is typically funded by other sources, such as state or county programs. Looking at this existing framework, members of the Agency and County leaders asked themselves a question: Could a tax district be used to consistently fund this annual work and ease the burden on existing funders? We now have more clarity on that particular question, but the topic of sustainability still lingers.

Local foundations have been extremely generous in their contributions to annual maintenance, and have done much of the heavy lifting to make our existing blueprint possible. While funding for in-lake work also comes from revenue generated by our member organizations (e.g., private donations, state budget allocations, governmental support), the foundations have formed a reliable core supporting this work for years. However, these organizations are not monoliths whose sole mission is to fund lake maintenance. They are discretionary. They each have their own financial considerations and fund a wide range of other valuable charity work that is not lake related. It is unrealistic to expect our local foundations to keep their contributions in lock-step with the steadily increasing and recurring costs of lake maintenance. As an example, costs for several plant management programs are projected to rise significantly in 2023 due to increases in fuel, materials, labor, etc. That means more money is needed just to do the *same* amount of work, let alone *more* work. Those same rising costs are hitting our community across the board, and increasing the amount of money needed to sustain the many different programs funded by our foundations.

Because this funding model does not provide the sustainability you might get from annual tax revenue, the Alliance and others continue to look for ways to shore up the long-term picture. One of the main things we do every year is assess a range of opportunities that are available for the lake and watershed, and craft them together in the most cohesive way possible. To help us achieve this we use a blueprint—an established process that engages potential funders, evaluates proposals, prioritizes projects, distributes grants, and evaluates outcomes. This blueprint has evolved and improved over time thanks to the generosity and vision of our local foundations, and community efforts. As an example, our Multi-Criteria Analysis Tool and 5-Year Implementation Strategy were developed and updated by outside consultants based on the current science, engineering, and technology of lake and watershed management while also incorporating stakeholder priorities.

These documents were designed to evaluate and prioritize projects by taking into account economic, environmental, and social factors. They are important pieces of our decision-making framework, which is employed each year by the local leaders that sit on our board of directors. In any given year, the funding opportunities may change. Levels may move up or down depending on a number of different factors, and it is our goal to direct the funds that are secured to the place where they can provide the most benefit to the lake and its users. Using the blueprint that the Alliance has built, we have steadily increased the funding passed along to our members. Since 2017, the amount of local dollars flowing through the Alliance to the lake and watershed has grown roughly ten-fold, from less than \$100,000 to nearly \$1 million in 2022. These annually distributed local dollars are complimented by millions in state, federal, and other county funds invested in the watershed.

A lake tax district was one potential path forward to reduce the uncertainty in this funding picture and better sustain work that is needed each year, but now other options are being considered. Some feel that a boat user fee is one way to bring new sustainable revenue into the picture, while others view American Rescue Plan Act funds as a way to help in the near-term. As funding streams continue to be explored there are also opportunities to improve and enhance our plan of work to better address the challenges on the road ahead. Key attributes of the Alliance's blueprint are that it is scalable, adaptable, and makes use of coordination and collaboration. In a relatively short period of time we have established and grown the consolidated local funding pool, directed resources based on shifting needs and dynamic conditions, built and grown partnerships, and consistently applied a framework to fund a significant portion of the work that benefits the lake and its users. There is progress to be made as we look to improve the consistent funding of work, as well as how it is planned, coordinated and integrated. Multitasking is common and critical in lake management. As such, it is important to evaluate how these two key pieces of the puzzle can fit together more snugly in the future, while at the same time making sure that our current resources and frameworks are put to good use in 2023.