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2024 Lake Funding Picture Comes Into Focus

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We may only be two months into 2024, but the New Year is already shaping up to be an interesting one when it comes to how we pay for local lake and watershed programs. There is always some level of uncertainty built into this type of work, on both the environmental and the human side of the ledger. Just as we don't always know what weather, plant, and algae conditions will be like at any given time, it is also difficult to perfectly predict what funds will be available from the many different contributors focused on Chautauqua Lake. While we will have to wait a bit longer to get a better picture of the environmental conditions, we do have some answers on the project funding side of things thanks to recent developments.

New funding programs offer important opportunities for the lake, and several are slated to roll out in 2024. In the past there have been relatively few opportunities to fund in-lake plant management with state dollars, but that is expected to change this coming year with the return of the Invasive Species Grant program. Both the Towns of North Harmony and Chautauqua have secured grants of \$100,000 apiece to manage invasive starry stonewort. This work is expected to take place late this summer at infestations near Ashville Bay and Prendergast Point, with the hope of stopping the spread of the invasive species before costs and scale escalate further. Last open in 2019, the return of the state's program is a welcome opportunity for local stakeholders and Alliance members who have been seeking new sources of funding for these emerging problems.

Recent changes to Chautauqua County's occupancy tax are also shaking up the funding picture for the coming year. In early January the County announced that lakes and waterways grant applications were open again, including a new program for 2024. This is the new "Fast Track" path, which is open to applications for all of the county's lakes, not just Chautauqua. These awards can fund up to \$50,000 in work across six categories including: shoreline maintenance, mechanical or biological submerged aquatic vegetation management, chemical submerged aquatic vegetation management, invasive species management, harmful algal bloom mitigation, or dredging and flood mitigation. The County notes that "In addition, there is a New or Unique Project Category to encourage the implementation of new in-lake projects that are likely to have a positive impact on tourism and recreation, but may not fit into the above project categories." We expect to hear about grant awards from this program sometime later in the spring. While both the state and local grant programs have undergone recent changes to their in-lake project funding, both pools also continue to play key roles in how we pay for long-term work to improve the watershed and ultimately the lake it feeds. Millions of dollars of watershed projects funded by state or occupancy tax grants are currently underway in the county or scheduled to begin soon.

This will also be the first year that new occupancy tax changes made at the state level impact the lake, as legislation was recently passed amending which programs and fees can be paid with bed tax dollars. *The Post-Journal* noted half of the County's bed tax dollars will now "be used for control, treatment or removal of invasive and nuisance weeds, reduction of harmful algal blooms or shoreline cleanup. Remaining money can be used for fishing, boating or recreational activities, reduction of watershed erosion, sedimentation and nutrient loading or similar activities." This new legislation is expected to ensure that more local dollars are directed to in-lake work like plant and algae management. Also on the county front, local leadership is continuing to look into new long-term funding options after considering but ultimately setting aside the possibility of a tax district last year. Currently a boat-user fee, similar to a vehicle registration, is being discussed at public meetings and considered as a potential future source.

These new paths to fund in-lake work will now complement longstanding sources of money—contributions by our local foundations, municipalities, and the public. These groups form a major core of funding for the annual programs that are needed to keep the lake usable and enjoyable. Sizable contributions from our foundations to the Alliance's Consolidated Funding Program, along with donations to local not-for-profits and funds earmarked by municipalities, are three keys to the lake's annual budget. These sources can change in scope and direction from year to year as well, considering the wide range of other needs in the community and varying priorities of stakeholders.

Considering the uncertainty baked into all these individual pieces, it seems clear that flexibility and adaptability should remain central goals of all those who use the lake and work to improve it. It can be difficult to know when these types of changes will be made, when new programs will be rolled out, and how they can best be used locally. Forging new partnerships and collaboration, emphasizing complementary lake management efforts, and honing a diverse portfolio of management tactics remain at the heart of the Alliance's work. They also ensure readiness to strike when the iron is hot as new or evolving funding opportunities present themselves.

We thank those who have already contributed this year and commend the work of our members engaged in the critical care of our lake and watershed. The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy, Chautauqua Lake Partnership, Chautauqua Lake Association, Chautauqua Institution, county, and nine towns and villages bordering the lake are readying their programs, staff, and equipment for the coming year, and we encourage those that are interested to reach out to learn more about the work they do and what you can do to help. Together, we look forward to helping deliver a safe and enjoyable 2024 on the lake.