

## Highlands Lakes & Trails Committee Annual Report

September 24, 2025, Board Meeting

The Lakes & Trails Committee (Committee), with support and guidance from Jim Hale (Board Advisor), continued gathering documents and information, and coordinating with ACS West and others, to advance several projects for the Community. The Committee members to date are Fred Leckie (Chairperson), Rick Stayman, and Mark Fetty.

### **Highlands Lake Boat Access – Signs, Vandalism etc., Potential Fence/Gate,**

The Committee drafted language for a new regulation sign and requested a new “no parking on the grass” sign for the boat access area and ACS West was able to get those signs made and placed according to the Committee’s recommendations.



Over the last year there have been continuous problems with use of the access site by non-residents of the Highlands Community, illegal fishing activities, vandalism, trash, and unwanted nighttime activities. The Board asked the Committee to investigate fence/gate options and get quotes from fence companies to install a fence and gate; Rick Staymen took the lead on this for the Committee. Rick was able to get four companies to come out to the site and three provided quotes; the companies are Minor Fence, Top Rail Fence, and Hurricane Fence Company. The quotes range from \$4,500 to \$8,300; Rick sent these quotes to the Board and Sam King, and **the Committee has recommended the Board go with the low bid from Minor Fence company for this Project.** The Committee will be glad to coordinate with the Board and ACS West if the Board approves moving forward with this project.

## **Highland Lake Dam Safety Certification**

The Committee has tried to continue supporting ACS West and the Board as they address requirements to ultimately obtain a Regular (unconditional) Dam Safety Operation & Maintenance Certificate, according to the provisions of the Dam Safety Act administered under the Dam Safety Program of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Over the last year, the Committee has not always been kept in the loop; so at this point the Committee has a number of unanswered questions about where we are in the Dam Safety Certification process. If the Board wants the Committee to continue to represent the Board in tracking progress, **the Committee strongly recommends a face-to-face meeting between the Committee, Board Advisor Jim Hale, Sam King (ACS West), and the Timmons Group (contracted Dam Safety engineering firm), so that we can all get on the same page as to what has been done, what still needs to be done, who needs to do what, and can we develop a new schedule to move this forward.**

## **Swift Creek Hiking Trail - Report from Committee member Mark Fetty**

Mark Fetty has continued to try and work with the Boy Scouts to get them involved in helping “develop” this trail; the Boy Scouts still show interest but have yet to formally commit to a project. Without commitment from the Scouts, Mark has gone ahead and purchased trail markers, and the Committee hopes to at least mark the trail this fall. Mark has also personally cut brush and weeds along the trail and offers the following report from recent visits to the Nature Trail and Swift Creek Trail (note major concerns about the dam that the trail goes over):

1. Nature Trail:
  - I walked the nature trail. It appears to be in good shape. Residents and/or homeowners must be helping and are doing a great job to keep it in shape.
2. Swift Creek Trail – Dam Area \*\*\*WARNING\*\*\*
  - With no continuing maintenance, the dam has become overgrown!
    - Weeds up to and over 6’ high cover the Dam, and so thick as to prevent easy passage.
    - The dam “top” has been cleared by Mark Fetty (by hand) to allow passage.
    - There are saplings **trees** up to, and greater than 4” diameter growing on the pond-side, and down-stream, faces of the Dam. This is in addition to extreme over-growth.  
These are not allowed on permitted dams.
      - **L&T Committee members, nor volunteers, can be expected to cover the scope of need to eliminate this growth.**
      - Immediate restorative work is needed.

- **Recommend** getting advice from Dam Safety experts (Timmons Group) that are already under contract.
      - How to best clear brush and trees and maintain of the earthen dam.
    - Continuous maintenance is needed/required.
      - **Recommend establishing a maintenance contract with a new, or established, contract company to keep the dam clear of overgrowth.**
- 3. Swift Creek Trail:
  - The trail from the Dam to Swift Creek Flood Plain...
    - There is controversy as to where the legal property line is.
      - Between surveys performed by Ryan Homes, the homeowner, and the developer, as to where the line is, there is still a question as to where the division is between the property owned by the HCA and the homeowner.
      - There is a wood post, likely on HCA property, but possibly placed by Ryan to placate the homeowner.
      - Without surrendering any legal claim on the contested property, we can avoid the issue by moving the “Lakes & Trails” path east of the wood post. Moving the trail eastward will allow visual “appreciation” of a second quarry.
    - Need to clear a path from the Dam to Swift Creek Flood Plain path.
  - Remainder of Trail:
    - The boy scouts (Troop 2886) are interested in projects, but timing seems to **NOT** be immediate, (and not targeted at our specific needs).
      - Projects are now being started by L&T Committee.
    - The North Trailhead initial 1/10 mi (HCA-owned) was cleared of weeds. Needs a maintenance plan.
    - Many trees and fallen logs were cleared in February by “Stumps”.
    - One large tree has fallen and is blocking the trail (north of north bridge).
      - A section needs to be cut out to allow passage.
    - There is evidence of trucks or 4-wheelers using portion of the trails:
      - Need signage forbidding gas motors.
- 4. Recommendations
  - **Need a plan to restore the Dam (clear it of vegetation)(contract).**
  - **Need an ongoing Dam maintenance plan (contract).**
    - **Keep Dam faces clear of overgrowth.**
  - **Need an ongoing trail maintenance plan (contract if desired):**
    - **Periodic walk**
      - **Chain-saw logs/trees as-needed.**
      - **Weed-eat weeds.**
      - **Keep dam top clear.**

## **Community Lakes Management, Protection, and Responsive Use Guidance Document**

Last year the Committee put together a guidance document that has important information, covenants, and state and county laws and regulations pertaining to the dos and don'ts of shoreline and water habitat management, fish and wildlife management, fishing, and boating, to help all lakefront landowners and all members using our Lakes meet our obligation to become good stewards of these important natural resources. Our Highland Community Lakes offer members a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities, including fishing, boating, wildlife viewing, and just plain relaxing and enjoying the outdoors. Our lakes, their shorelines, and surrounding terrestrial habitat are home to dozens of species of plants, fish, wildlife, and aquatic life that depend on clean water and adequate habitat to live and thrive. Because of the recreational opportunities and critical fish and wildlife habitat found in our Highlands Community, it is essential that all of us do what we can to manage and protect these valuable water, plant, and wildlife resources. For those of us that are lucky enough to live on the Lakes and those that want to enjoy recreating on the Lakes, it is essential that you read this guidance document.

During this report year, this document was hand delivered or mailed to all lakefront landowners on Highlands Lake and Lake Margaret, and it is still on the Highlands website under Lakes & Trails Committee and under Resources – The Highlands Lakes and Trails.

### **Professional Biological and Water Quality Evaluation of Highlands Lake**

The Lakes & Trails Committee feels that we need a professional look at some current and potential problems with Highlands Lake and have some mitigation options developed to better manage these problems; simply put, we are trying to take a proactive, instead of reactive, approach to providing and maintaining a healthy, productive aquatic environment in our community lakes. Questions to be answered:

#### **Potential dredging?**

**Do we need to dredge certain areas of our Lakes that have “filled in” from sediment deposition over time? If so, what specific areas need dredging? Are there other options instead of dredging to help with sediment deposition?** To answer these questions, we need to have a current contour map of both lake bottoms and current sediment deposition maps (particularly for the upper ends of our lakes).

#### **Lake stratification and stagnation?**

**Do our lakes stratify in the summer? If so, could physical and chemical stratification cause water quality and aquatic life support issues? Do we have the potential for lake stagnation caused by drought and water pumping for irrigation that could lead to significant water quality issues?** To answer these questions, we need to have a current contour map of both lake bottoms and summertime, water

temperature/dissolved oxygen profile graphs for both lakes (particularly in the deepest parts of our lakes).

#### Fish population and water quality?

**What are the current fish population and water quality parameters in Highland Lake? Are there any management strategies needed to address any identified problems?** To answer these questions, we need to have a fish population survey and water quality sampling conducted to let us know we have any current problems that require mitigative management strategies now and/or to provide baseline data for making management decisions if and when needed in the future.

The Committee worked with a professional aquatic biological lake management consultant (John Kauffman LLC) to develop a proposal (with cost estimate), that was approved by the Board and subsequently contracted by Sam King (ACS West). Tragically John Kauffman passed away while traveling in Norway and was obviously not able to perform the work outlined in the contract. John was a great friend, colleague, husband, father, and grandfather, who dedicated his entire 55+-year career to protecting, managing, and enhancing Virginia's aquatic natural resources. The streams, rivers, lakes, and ponds of Virginia would look very different, would support far fewer fish and wildlife species, and would support far less recreational opportunities today, if it had not been for the public service and dedication of John Kauffman.

The Committee feels that we still need a professional look at these problems and some potential options to better manage these problems and provide for a healthy, productive aquatic environment in our community lakes. **The Committee will again start the process of finding a consulting firm that can perform all the needed studies and bring a recommendation to the Board.**