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## Fairfax Co. faces tough choices to save Lake Accotink from massive sediment build up.

by Jay Korff

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Lake Accotink in Springfield, VA. Photo by Jay Korff/7News <p>{/p}

FAIRFAX COUNTY, Va. (7News) — *Reporter's Notebook: One of Fairfax County's most popular parks is at the center of a decades-long battle over how to save it. Lake Accotink is quickly filling up with sediment that's impacting wildlife and destroying the lake. The county has two primary plans to dredge the lake but folks who live nearby and use the park regularly have concerns about the options. What all can agree on is the beauty of this hidden gem.*

***Lake Accotink is one of Fairfax County's most valuable assets," said Fairfax County Supervisor James Walkinshaw.***



*Photo courtesy Save Lake Accotink Community (Facebook group)*

For nearly a century, people with poles and bikes, kayaks, canoes, and cameras, like photographer Keith Freeburn, have captured the soaring beauty and savored the serenity of [Lake Accotink Park in Springfield, Virginia](#).

***Some of my best experiences have been here at Lake Accotink," said photographer Keith Freeburn.***



*Photo courtesy Keith Freeburn.*

Cesar Contreras lives nearby. He can't imagine a day without the healing properties of this hidden oasis.

"It's part of my day. I come here every morning, [at] 6 a.m., ride my bike, jog, or mediate. Not too many might know about this place but the people who live around here definitely depend on this place," said Contreras.



*Lake Accotink in Springfield, VA. Photo by Jay Korff/7News*

But, this place of reflection and recreation, where gravel paths lead to stellar trails, faces a crisis lurking just below its surface.

## **The Problem**

Hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of sediment – rocks, sand, sticks, mud, and sludge – have flowed into the lake. Without intervention through a massive, years-long dredging project, the sediment will eventually consume and kill the lake.

"In 2018, the community was asked do you want to save Lake Accotink, preserve it as a lake, and the answer was a very resounding yes," said Supervisor Walkinshaw.



Lake Accotink in Springfield, VA. Photo by Jay Korff/7News

You may be wondering why so much silt and sediment stream into Lake Accotink. Well, there are two primary culprits, according to experts like Charles Smith with Fairfax County's Department of Public Works and Environmental Services.

***It's really a difficult decision. We're working closely with stakeholders to make this work, " Smith told our reporter Jay Korff in a recent online interview.***

The first issue is the adjacent neighborhood. This large subdivision, built back when stormwater management wasn't prioritized, sits right above the lake. Smith said when it rains, runoff pours unabated into Lake Accotink.



*Accotink Creek in Wakefield Park. Photo by Jay Korff/7News*

The other offender is the lake's main tributary, Accotink Creek. Decades of erosion have forced so much debris into the lake that its average depth is now only 4-feet. Despite millions of dollars invested in stream restoration projects, the sediment just keeps coming thanks to a number of factors including more extreme rain events.

Smith tells 7News that the goal of dredging, which has been done three times since this man-made lake was built in 1940, is to remove some 500,000 cubic yards of sediment so the lake can return to an average depth of 8-feet. This will have multiple benefits including better water quality which in turn provides a healthier environment for birds and aquatic life.

The good news: after years of debate, two proposals percolated to the top. But each plan has critics.



Lake Accotink in Springfield, VA. Photo by Jay Korff/7News

"I've been coming here for 20 plus years, and I just absolutely love this park, love it. We have birds, fishing, all the actual elements you need for a nature moment in a pretty urban area. We are a built-up urban area and having this nature is an oasis that is not only necessary for us to connect to nature, but it really helps with wellness," said Julie Childers, Executive Director of Trails for Youth.

Childers and Springfield Civic Association President Gail Nittle recently sat down with 7News to discuss their hopes and fears.

***"We want the dredging. We just don't want the dewatering site here where it's going to have to traipse through our neighborhood, Nittle said.***



*Lake Accotink in Springfield, VA. Photo by Jay Korff/7News*

## **Present Dredging Proposals**

In the first proposal, crews would load dredged-up sediment onto trucks in a nearby industrial park and then drive through Gail Nittle's neighborhood an estimated 190 times a day, five days a week for three years.

"This is not country. This is neighborhoods. These are 23-2500 households that live in Crestwood and Lynnbrook. I just don't know how the neighborhood can maintain a quality of life, a safe quality of life with this being introduced. It's to me, unconscionable," Nittle said.



*Accotink Creek in Wakefield Park. Photo by Jay Korff/7News*

The other plan involves running a relatively narrow pipeline from Lake Accotink north to Wakefield Park where sediment would be trucked right onto Braddock Road, then Interstate 495. The sediment would eventually go to a quarry in the region. In this second scenario, 7.5 acres of trees in Wakefield Park would come down. Some are concerned about the environmental impacts associated with losing trees.

## **Local Groups Working to Save Lake Accotink and Accotink Creek**

We also chatted with [Save Lake Accotink](#) President Allan Robertson.

“Lake Accotink Park may be the most biodiverse of all of Fairfax County's parks. The park patrons are also diverse. Both are matters to celebrate and protect, and Lake Accotink is essential to the protection of nature and community. Fairfax County needs Lake Accotink, but saving it comes with a cost. It seems part of that cost is either the destruction of acres of mature forest or increased truck traffic along Highland St., Amherst Avenue and Backlick Roaf in Springfield.”

Robertson also tells 7News On Your Side in early 2018 his organization, Save Lake Accotink, distributed hundreds of yard signs, and car magnets along with gathering thousands of signatures to save the lake.



*Lake Accotink in Springfield, VA. Photo by Jay Korff/7News*

7News On Your Side also spoke with Phillip Latasa with [Friends of Accotink Creek](#).

"The erosion and sediment caused by paved surface runoff [are] what's filling the lake so rapidly of which we must find a solution," Latasa added.

Latasa said the issue is bigger than runoff from one neighborhood going into Lake Accotink.

"There's 26-square-miles of watershed that's paved or has a roof is contributing directly to this problem," said Latasa.

"What I say to anyone who has [a] concern about a specific site is to stay engaged with the process, follow the process, but we are going to have to at the end of the day reckon with the fact that if we want to save the lake, which I think the community does, there are going to be some impacts and we have to go into that with our eyes wide open," Supervisor James Walkinshaw said.

Walkinshaw said he's still looking for other options. A final decision is expected in just weeks with dredging slated to begin in the summer of 2023.



*Photo courtesy Keith Freeburn.*

Until then, Cesar and his daughter Michelle will return to enjoy Lake Accotink's offerings.

"You got birds. You've got people fishing. You got everything out here. It's one of a kind. This is like home to me," concludes Contreras.



*Photo courtesy Keith Freeburn.*

And Keith Freeburn will keep snapping shots of creatures who call Lake Accotink home.

"They ask me 'where did you get those eagle photos?' and I'll say Lake Accotink and when I tell them Springfield there like, 'no there's no way you got bald eagle photos in Springfield,'" add Freeburn.

## The Cost and Looking Ahead

The county has already set aside some \$65 million for this project. It's expected to start in the summer of 2023 and take three years to complete. Smith tells 7News On Your Side that the county is taking a long-term approach to this project so future dredging won't take as long or cost as much. Smith said after this dredging project is complete, the county plans on re-dredging the lake for one year every five years to maintain lake health.



*Photo courtesy Keith Freeburn.*

There are a lot of resources associated with this project. [Click here](#) for more information from Fairfax County. [Click here](#) for more information from another local group, [Friends of Accotink Creek](#).



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