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# Officials ready to let urban runoff swallow a cherished Virginia lake



By [Antonio Olivo](#)

March 5, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EST



Garbage collects at the edge of Lake Accotink on Feb. 22 in Springfield, Va. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Lake Accotink has long been a cherished oasis amid Northern Virginia's busy streets, one dredged three times since 1965 to keep silty urban runoff from swallowing it up.

With a warming climate making heavy rains more frequent and the increasing runoff damaging waterways across the Chesapeake Bay region, local officials now are ready to give up on the idea of Lake Accotink being a lake.

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Due to the arriving sediment, the 105-year-old human-made body of water is nowhere near the eight-foot depth it was when it was last dredged in 2008, Fairfax County public works officials say. In some portions away from the shore, seagulls are able to stand with just their feet getting wet.

The public works department says another planned dredge, approved by the county board in 2019, should not go forward, because it would be too expensive and might cause more environmental harm than good with all the truck trips required to clear out the waste again and again in coming years.

“It’s kind of like digging a hole in the beach when the waves are coming in,” said Charles Smith, who oversees watershed projects for the county’s public works department.

The department’s recommendation to the county board that the lake be allowed to become a semiaquatic wetland has stirred anger among Springfield-area residents who have enjoyed it as a recreation hub.

[\*Salt in D.C.-area water sources becoming worrisome, experts warn\*](#)

On a sunny weekend day, the county park that surrounds the lake fills with the sounds of all-day picnics, outdoor concerts and nature enthusiasts looking for bald eagles or otters — a mix of people of all incomes and backgrounds that reflects the broader population.

But, like the rest of the Washington region, the community is facing the result of decades of development that often did not have adequate storm-water controls or preserve enough open space to serve as buffers against storm runoff, county officials say.

“This is why we have the sediment,” C. Greg Carroll, 67, who has lived near the lake since 2004, said at a recent crowded town hall meeting about Lake Accotink’s future. “We’ve got to live more compactly. It is a disgrace that we haven’t saved more open space and more farmland.”

## **A cycle of dredging**

Lake Accotink was created in 1918, when the federal government constructed a dam along the Accotink Creek watershed to store drinking water for what is now Fort Belvoir.

By the late 1950s, the water was no longer suitable for drinking and, in 1964, half of it was filled with debris and silt flowing in from the nearby subdivisions that sprang up during a massive population boom in Fairfax County.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dredged Lake Accotink in 1965. Then, the federal government sold it, the dam and what would become parkland surrounding it to Fairfax County’s Park Authority, when about 101,000 visitors were already picnicking or fishing there every year.



A seagull takes flight at Lake Accotink. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Five years later, the lake was so polluted that the county closed it to recreational activities and launched plans to drain, clean and refill it — allowing it to reopen for boating and fishing the following summer.

So began a cycle of lake maintenance, mostly through dredging, that became increasingly complicated as Northern Virginia grew into a suburban metropolis of planned communities, business districts and shopping plazas — all with roads and other impervious surfaces channeling storm runoff into surrounding lakes and streams.

### [Stream restorations in Chesapeake Bay region fuels debate in Fairfax County](#)

Another dredge occurred in 1984 and again in 2008. In between were 5K races around the water, carousel rides near the beach and leisurely boat trips, before the [reaccumulating mud banks](#) got too high for some larger boats.

In 2019, when the amount of incoming sediment settling in the lake had increased to nearly 20,000 cubic yards per year, the county and area residents agreed on what they thought would be a permanent solution. They developed a plan to dredge 350,000 cubic yards, bringing the lake's depth back to eight feet, with other dredges to take place in subsequent years.

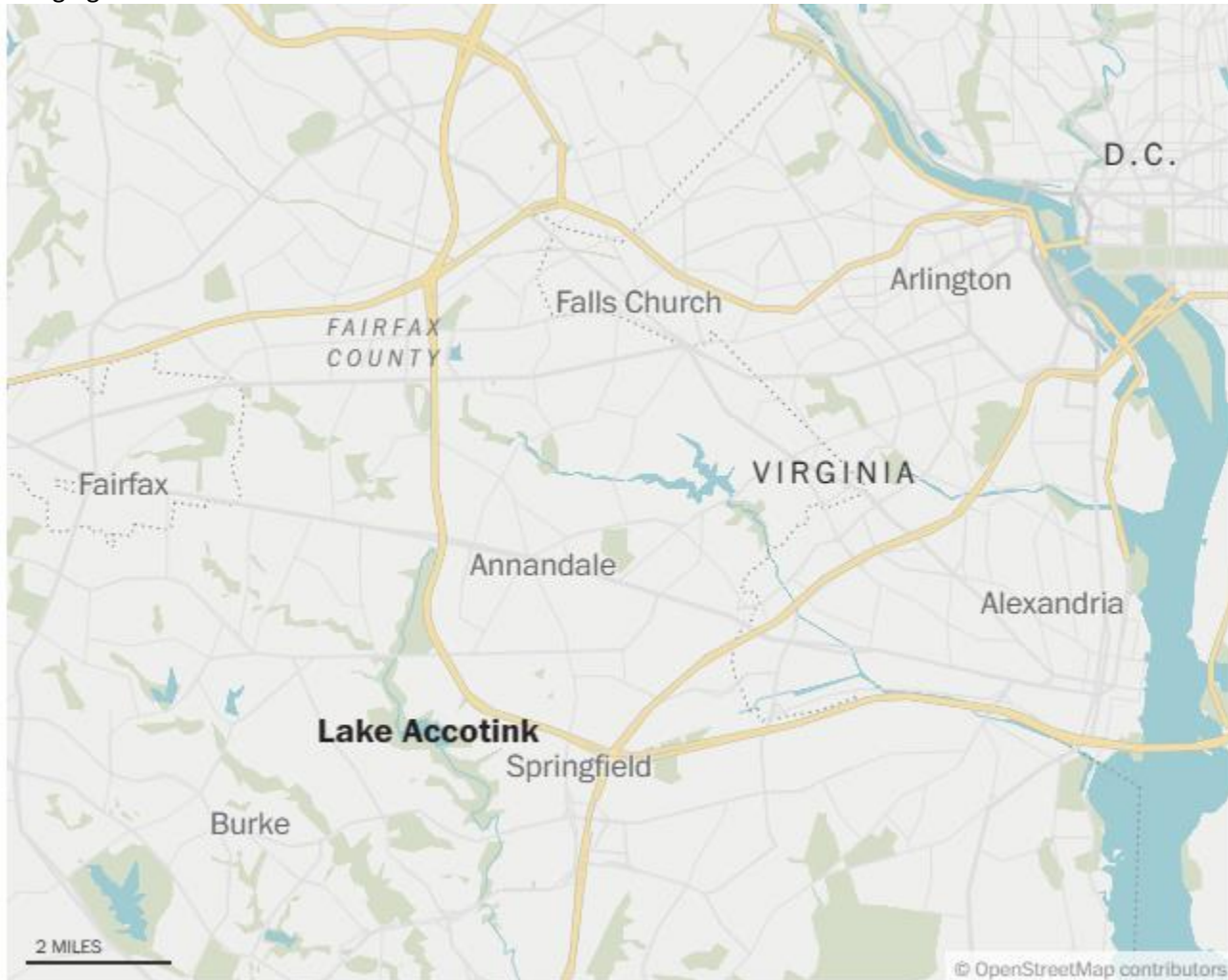
The county estimated that initial dredge would cost about \$30 million, a sum the Board of Supervisors readily agreed to finance through a state revolving loan fund for clean-water projects.

The strategy would allow the county to “really ensure that we’re going to save Lake Accotink,” then-board Chair Sharon Bulova (D) said before the unanimous vote.

Nearly four years later, the public works department concluded that a variety of previously unknown factors would drive up the cost.

### **Lake Accotink in Northern Virginia**

Long polluted by silty urban runoff, Lake Accotink may cease being a lake under a Fairfax County proposal to abandon dredging.



ANTONIO OLIVO / THE WASHINGTON POST

First, the county isn’t allowed to use a Dominion Energy power line easement in Wakefield Park, north of the lake, as a free staging ground for the sediment to dry out before being hauled away, as was earlier believed. After consulting with Dominion, the county learned that the sediment would block the power lines in the event of an emergency and that the area is in a flood plain, department officials said.

That makes it necessary to use another site, probably in the same park, that would require about seven acres of trees to be cleared away to make room for the staging.

Also, about 150,000 cubic yards more sediment than initially expected would have to be removed to get to the desired depth of eight feet at the end of the project’s three-year period — in total, enough silty waste to fill a football field to a height of more than 200 feet.

Finally, the project would mean as many as 50,000 truck trips through the area, potentially through some neighborhoods, with smaller “maintenance” dredge projects needed every five years, the county said.

The estimated cost of the first dredge escalated to \$95 million, with another \$300 million required to keep the lake intact over a 20-year period alone, the public works department said.

“That is money that would not be available to reduce flood risks for thousands of residents whose homes are experiencing flooding today,” Chris Herrington, the department’s director, told the town hall meeting crowd. “That is money that will not be available for stream restoration or for us to build any other important county project that the county would otherwise want.”

## **Emotional ties**

The decision over what to do next lies with the Board of Supervisors.

But the prospect of asking Fairfax taxpayers to shoulder the approximately \$400 million cost — through a larger state loan or a bond issuance that would hurt the county’s ability to finance other projects — is not appealing, several supervisors said.

*[This model of wealthy suburban living starting to fray](#)*

“Right now, the prognosis for this project is not good,” said Supervisor James R. Walkinshaw (D-Braddock), whose district includes a large portion of Lake Accotink. He added that he nonetheless hasn’t given up hope on what he called an “agonizing” situation.



Gail Nittle, head of the Springfield Civic Association, looks out at Lake Accotink. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

Gail Nittle has lived across the street from the Accotink Park for 40 years. The head of the Springfield Civic Association, Nittle, 76, sees Lake Accotink as a leveling force in a steadily changing community of various incomes, where someone without many resources can enjoy the same free amenity as everyone else.

“If we’re really concerned about social equity, why not allow them to keep the one enjoyment that they can walk to?” Nittle said. “They can do the canoes, they can kayak, they can fish. Though, I wouldn’t recommend eating those fish.”

Allan Robertson, who co-founded Save Lake Accotink, a community group instrumental in formulating the 2019 dredging plan, said he believes the county has long wanted to abandon the lake. During initial conversations about the 2019 dredging plan, the county said the influx of sediment is too great, Robertson said.

“What is absolutely clear is that, in 2018, the only choice the county wanted was to let the lake fill in,” Robertson said. “In 2023, the only choice they want is to fill the lake in. There are no dots to connect there. It’s the same dot.”

Former local supervisor John C. Cook (R-Braddock) agreed and accused the public works department of “fearmongering” by suggesting the surrounding neighborhoods would be inundated by truck traffic if the dredge occurs. The community and county had already agreed that the 2019 dredging plan would involve staging most of the sediment in Wakefield Park, where Interstate 495 is a short drive away, Cook said.

He suggested any effects would be reduced by stretching out the dredge period, so less sediment needs to be hauled away every year — an idea the county says wouldn't make much of a dent because of the massive amounts coming in.

Cook also argued that the potential environmental effects, through truck trips and tree clearing, would not be as great as the public works department suggests.

"We cut down five acres of trees for other development projects; hell, it's done all the time," he said.

"Braddock Road itself takes 70,000 cars per day. These trucks, yes, they're dirty. But they're not going to appreciatively affect the environment any more than the additional car traffic that comes with normal growth."

## What would it look like?

The storm runoff from developed surfaces has polluted the Chesapeake Bay, killing aquatic life, leading to federal requirements for states and local governments to restore streams whose banks are eroding under the pressure.



Sujay Kaushal, seen in 2022, stands next to a manhole that has been exposed by erosion along a stream on the University of Maryland's campus in College Park. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

Fairfax County has several such multimillion-dollar projects underway, including some along Accotink Creek, upstream from the lake, that are aimed at reducing sediment, salinity and other pollutants flowing south.

But the benefits of those projects are years away, with the continuing runoff rushing in sometimes redamaging areas that were previously restored.

“They’re not just healthy systems that are operating under normal, healthy conditions,” said Joe Wood, a senior scientist for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation focusing on Virginia. “They are systems that are being flooded with high volumes of erosion and high volumes of storm water. You have to keep investing and taking care of these waterways that have been so disturbed.”

That reality complicates the question over what to do about Lake Accotink.

County public works officials say that allowing a wetland to form where the lake sits — something that would gradually happen over an unknown number of years should dredging stop — would result in more ecological diversity to the area.

New plants there could trap the incoming sediment before it ultimately flows downstream into the Potomac River, though not all of it, the department said.

The cost of any additional stream repair work downstream required because of that escaping sediment would be “nowhere near” the cost of dredging, said Smith, the wetland projects manager.

But it’s unclear what that wetland would ultimately look like, given the magnitude of sediment coming in, said Jeffrey C. McKay (D-At Large), chairman of the county board, adding that he wants the county to commission a study to find out the answer before the lake’s fate is decided.

If it becomes a functioning wetland, akin to Huntley Meadows Park about 11 miles away, the county could develop a plan to maintain that as a new main feature of the park, McKay said. “That’s a different story than what it would look like if, in fact, it just became overrun as an uncontrolled sediment dump,” he said. “That’s what we need to figure out.”

On the other hand, “the idea that we’re going to have to go in there every five years in perpetuity? That’s the part that’s really concerning,” McKay said. “This is a situation where there is really not a good answer.”

As the community waits for the county board to decide the lake’s fate, those who visit take in the view — knowing that it may one day be gone.

On a recent morning, Jaime Morán, his wife, Isabél, and their 5-year-old son stood alone on the lake’s beach, feeding some geese as a blanket of fog over the water partially obscured the towering pine trees and dam in the distance.





Garbage collects at the edge of Lake Accotink. (Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post)

The couple said they have visited the lake since 1998, picnicking or walking the lake's perimeter, where they've spotted water snakes and raccoons.

"They should do what they can to save it; it's not just us human beings. The animals here also depend on this space," Jaime Morán said in Spanish, standing near a cluster of branches, plastic water bottles and other debris that had made their way to the lake's edge.



By [Antonio Olivo](#)

Antonio Olivo covers government, politics and other issues in Northern Virginia. He has also reported from Afghanistan and Mexico after joining The Washington Post in 2013. [\\_Twitter](#)

## Comments

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### Etienne

6 minutes ago

Maryland has no natural lakes.

share

### Another Fine Mess

29 minutes ago

(Edited)

So, they are just going to condemn the fish in this lake to death by poisoning, and ruin a resource that other wildlife depend upon. Shameful.

But, like the rest of the Washington region, the community is facing the result of decades of development that often did not have adequate storm-water controls or preserve enough open space to serve as buffers against storm runoff, county officials say.

This still happens far too often. Citizens need to be vigilant whenever development takes place. Do not be a gullible YIMBY.

share

### Vox Populi

1 hour ago

(Edited)

I live very close to the lake so this is personal for me. I say let nature take its course. You can only hold her back for so long. Complete the study to help determine its natural outcome and plan accordingly. Sure, having the lake nearby is awesome but honestly Burke Lake is only 15 minutes away.

share

### Twystof8

1 hour ago

If you're relying on Fairfax County's office that oversees environmental management, you can count on (1) cost overruns, (2) a solution based on computer modeling, not actual empirical evidence of either the scale of the problem or the solution, and (3) contractors falling all over themselves to get a piece of this cash cow. The county officials are simply untrustworthy.

My neighborhood, just south of Old Town, just experienced this. They used computer modeling to assess how much erosion, nitrogen and phosphorus was flowing from two absolutely tiny storm-water runoff ditches that dissected two neighborhood parks. They clear-cut the existing trees and other plants in the parks, destroying the very plants that take up nitrogen and oxygen, and their \$3 million project ultimately cost the taxpayers \$4.5 million. There were no measurements of the chemical levels in the water either before or after the destruction, and in a FOIA'd exchange between the county's project manager and the neighborhood's parks chairman, the project manager admitted that the amount of destruction was not because the project required it, but because "that's the size of the equipment that the contractors have."

Before the project, a group of neighbors trying to protect the parks from unnecessary harm met Dan Storck, the Board of Supervisors' member for this district. In that meeting, he admitted that he didn't pay attention to projects that were "only a few million dollars." Later, those neighbors presented him with a letter that, among other things, revealed that more than half of the citizens of the affected neighborhood had signed a petition disapproving the scale of the destruction; they didn't oppose fixing erosion problems in the few places that they occurred in those run-off ditches, but

didn't were adamantly opposed to clear-cutting the parks just so the county could get "credits" for protecting the Bay. Storck didn't even acknowledge the petition. It was all a sad joke.

share

**shooter jim**

1 hour ago

(Edited)

Keep the lake!

Everyone likes a lake near by and Accotink is a wonderful lake. All the wild life, boats, hiking trail and the old RR viaduct, a very scenic spot in the tree lined community. The local community needs to back the dredging to keep their home a pristine location.

As for the environmental side; With the stream starting on the other side of the city of Fairfax, it gets a lot of run off rain water, mud and trash. The lake is a big collector of all and silts up, but it also keeps mud, trash and pollution from going down stream, a sort of filter. So environmentally it should have dredging when needed. Remember if it is turned into a stagnate wetland all the upstream run off rain water, mud, trash and pollution will still run into the stagnate wetland and the place will be a stinking mess.

Note ; Stagnate wetlands only work when the feeding streams are very clean.

share

**Arne Sakmussen**

2 hours ago

Before there was a lake, there was a beautiful flowing creek. Alive with reptiles and amphibians, mammals like otters and muskrats! It was a living ecosystem supporting all kinds of life. Sure, the lake is fun to walk around and paddle on, but a flowing, cool creek with trails on either side would create many recreation opportunities as well. Possibly, opening the dam and allowing the polluted sediment to flow freely downstream will mean some degradation, but that will clear up quickly! Something to think about.

share

**Zabaglione**

2 hours ago

I too wondered why that wasn't considered.

share

**lanhampete1**

17 minutes ago

Open or

the dam and all the sediment will end up in the bay. So there's probably a catch-22 here that no one is talking about now, but will come up in the future.

share

**divi3**

2 hours ago

The history presented here indicates a man made lake that needs to be let go.

share

**r.l.luethe**

3 hours ago

So where will that sediment go if they do not dredge and haul it away? \$30 million is a huge amount of money, but what will it cost someone else to deal with that silt somewhere else?

share

### **MEC20201202**

3 hours ago

Too many people. Our natural environment cannot survive our growing numbers.

We need to reduce the number of human beings on this planet because we are exceeding Earth's ability to sustain us and many other species. But how?

Educate our young about the advantages of each couple raising just one child.

This reduces human population to a sustainable level in 1-2 generations. This approach not only keeps us from populating ourselves into oblivion but it comes with advantages not immediately apparent.

Each couple can focus all their parenting efforts on just one child instead of diluting them over two or more. Child rearing becomes less expensive.

Income not required to raise additional children can be accrued to retirement accounts for the parents, making their later years more financially secure.

#### ***What does it cost to raise a child?***

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/interactive/2022/cost-raising-child-calculator/?itid=hp-more-top-stories>

*"...Raising a child is expensive. From the day your baby is born until the day they turn 18, your family will spend about \$310,605 — or about \$17,000 a year, according to a new Brookings Institution analysis of data from the U.S. Agriculture Department..."*

Investing \$310K in an interest-bearing account over 18 years for each child a couple does *not* have could result in a very healthy retirement fund. Less Social Security will be needed if parents save on child costs.

Fewer children will also ease taxpayer burdens for child-related expenses at the local, state and national levels (i.e. smaller schools with fewer students per teacher).

Persuading couples to raise only one child will massively reduce our consumption of Earth's resources, and reduce production of GHGs that contribute to sea level rise and the displacement of populations.

We are going to take a hit no matter what, so let's handle it wisely.

share

### **YoungKitC**

3 hours ago

Growth at all cost. You reap what you sow, Fairfax County.

share

### **Etienne**

3 hours ago

My favorite piece of trivia. Virginia used to have 3 natural lakes, but now only has 2. What happened to the other?

share

### **HokieAnnie**

1 hour ago

Mountain lake disappears from time to time depending upon the springs that feed it.

share

### **Etienne**

7 minutes ago

close! But not quite.

The third is now in West Virginia.

share

### **HerderOfCats**

4 hours ago

Let the lake return to wetland.

share

### **philnip**

3 hours ago

Not until they consult an ecologist or two. It wasn't a wetland before the lake was built, so it can't "return" to its natural state. Does massive run-off produce an ecologically viable wetlands? I don't know, Neither do they; they didn't study it enough to make an educated guess.

share

### **GRBNYC**

5 hours ago

So began a cycle of lake maintenance, mostly through dredging, that became increasingly complicated as Northern Virginia grew into a suburban metropolis of planned communities, business districts and shopping plazas — all with roads and other impervious surfaces channeling storm runoff into surrounding lakes and streams.

This sentence would better reflect reality if the word "poorly" were inserted before "planned communities, business districts and shopping plazas."

share

### **annie2009**

5 hours ago

I live in a still-rural area of Virginia. But of course, all the towns and counties want is GROWTH. People here think I am silly for worrying about how every new building is surrounded by vast swathes of asphalt where there used to be green things growing. They cannot imagine it ever being different around here, but it's inevitable. I don't think anyone has a clue that they (meaning governments and developers) can plan and mitigate the environmental costs of growth.

share

### **JeanCP**

5 hours ago

Gail Nittle was my neighbor her kids grew up going to the Lake as did mine. Lake Accotink was a going concern that the county was willing to support for many years. They had canoeing and other events at the park. Not only does Crestwood back into it, but others as well. When did Fairfax become a poor county, it's has the highest tax revenues. Gerry Connolly needs to get on it!

share

### **GD Co**

5 hours ago

Spending money on the same thing over and over again is one way of becoming a poor county. Kudos to Fairfax County to coming to terms with this. Reality doesn't care about what we want.

share

**MyPeriodTrumpsYourPeriod\_\_\_\_PERIOD**

42 minutes ago

Spending money on the same thing over and over again is part and parcel of governing the county. Infrastructure requires ongoing maintenance.

share

**We\_Two**

4 hours ago

Gerry Connolly is a Member of Congress. The federal government is not responsible for Lake Accotink; this responsibility lies with Fairfax County.

share

**Redline SOS**

6 hours ago

Collection and landfilling of the sediment is probably the better option given it keeps it from everything the Chesapeake.

share

**GD Co**

5 hours ago

Understand what you are saying, but this is just one small part of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Shouldn't everyone in the entire watershed be doing that?

share

**Roger42**

6 hours ago

Good article. The conclusion seems to be to let the area revert to a wetland. Nature has a way of reclaiming degraded land much faster than we often would imagine. Spend the \$millions on stream protection to reduce the never-ending problem of siltation.

share

**philnip**

3 hours ago

It wasn't a wetland before the lake was built, so it can't "return" to a natural state as a wetland. We don't know that it won't just turn into a huge mosquito-y mud pit. Neither do they. They didn't study it. They are just guessing that because wetlands attract more flora and fauna, that is what will happen here. Massive run-off from construction doesn't strike me as Everglade quality material, but again, they paid for a study to estimate the cost of dredging, and they *assume* the cost of doing nothing is zero. That may not be the case.

share

**OBXMermaid**

6 hours ago

Why can't they use a variety of methods? Make the stream abatement/runoff projects the prime target. Include runoff abatement in any new building project...costs to be born by the developers. Then begin a dredging project that will be worked on over the years that the runoff abatement takes to catch up with the runoff problem. One answer is never

enough for such a huge project. Any change to Lake Accotink will impact the Potomac river, the Chesapeake Bay, and ultimately the Atlantic Ocean. Why not opt for making the lake the priority instead of making money the priority.

share

**camsron**

5 hours ago

*Excellent comment.* Give the cause priority.

share

**Fairfax31**

4 hours ago

(Edited)

No need to dredge it to 8 feet either. Nobody is putting a yacht in the lake.

share

**rashomon**

4 hours ago

"costs to be born by the developers"

That gets to how complicated and interrelated priorities can be. Those costs will ultimately be born not by the developers but by buyers, further driving up costs in an area where the lack of affordable housing is already a major problem

share

**philnip**

2 hours ago

I might agree with you, but there's nothing to indicate the County is going to address that problem. I've lived in Fairfax for decades, and that issue is discussed once in a while, but the reality is they don't care about affordable housing because they don't have to. It's been very discouraging to see it go from a place that was *barely* affordable for people with average salaries to one where I couldn't afford to buy the modest house I live in.

share

**rashomon**

2 hours ago

And it's not just that they don't care. County boards seem to prefer expensive housing, since it means higher return on property taxes. Arlington has the same problem. So, yeah—I probably shouldn't have used the word "priority" when it demonstrably is not one.

share

**juniejr**

6 hours ago

Loss of this lakes

s the ONLY accessible access to waterfront views in all of Fairfax County. On any given day you can go to the marina and see people in their cars or on the accessible benches enjoying a view of the water and wildlife. There is no other FCPA park that provides that ability. The county will also lose the revenue stream from the (also accessible) pavilions and party areas which will lose their appeal without the lake. I'm not aware of other pars which offer amenities that are equally available to wheelchair users, visitors with mobility issues or elderly persons. The quoted costs from the county

are deceptively presented as a whole to scare people. They include monies that will be spent over many, many years. Please don't let them take away this accessible opportunity.

share

**ThreeDogsCo**

6 hours ago

Isn't Burke Lake accessible?

share

**Vox Populiar**

57 minutes ago

I think what the OP is saying is that Accotink has a parking lot with a great view of the lake. Burke Lake does not.

share

**West Virginia Teacher**

4 hours ago

There is Burke Lake. A far better planned and maintained park.

share

**Whip or Will**

7 hours ago

Once again, too many people is the ultimate problem. Use birth control.

share

**camsron**

5 hours ago

This will stop the runoff?

share