

Glen Lake/ Crystal River Watershed Overlay District: A Long-Term Water Quality Protection Strategy

Glen Lake is an extraordinary resource and a cornerstone of the local economy. The lake has exceptional water quality, which attracted many of us to the region in the first place. For years, the Glen Lake Association has advocated practices and programs to protect water quality. Over the past three years, the GLA's Watershed Protection Project Task Force with representation from multiple community partners including Cleveland, Empire, Glen Arbor and Kasson Townships, has worked to develop a long-term lake protection strategy. This work has culminated in the drafting of zoning provisions that, if implemented, would help to reduce the impact of future development in the Glen Lake/ Crystal River Watershed. These draft zoning provisions are contained within an overlay district.

What is the goal?

The goal of the project is to ensure that surface and groundwater in the Glen Lake-Crystal River Watershed are protected to the extent practical through township planning, zoning, and other legal tools.

What is an overlay district?

An overlay district is a set of supplemental zoning regulations that apply to a specific geographic area, in this case, the Glen Lake/Crystal River Watershed. Development within the overlay district must comply with zoning regulations in the underlying zoning district in addition to the provisions of the overlay district.

Why a watershed overlay district?

Land use activities in the watershed directly impact water quality. If adopted by each of the four townships in the Glen Lake-Crystal River watershed, a watershed overlay district would provide uniform development standards that would minimize the impact of development in the watershed and protect Glen Lake over the long term.

Would a watershed overlay district prevent development?

No. Development could still occur in the watershed, but in a way that would have minimal impact on the environment.

Has this been done elsewhere?

Several states including Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Minnesota have state-wide shoreland development standards. Similar development standards are in place on designated natural rivers in Michigan. Nearby Crystal Lake in Benzie County has a watershed overlay district that has guided development in the Crystal Lake watershed for over 20 years.

What are we trying to accomplish?

We are trying to protect Glen Lake over the long term by reducing the impact of future development. This is sometimes referred to as "low impact development."

What is low impact development?

Low impact development (LID) is an approach to development that minimizes environmental impacts often associated with development. LID is being used nationwide to proactively manage development. The basic idea of LID is to retain runoff close to its source. Essentially, rainwater is managed where it falls. The highly permeable soils throughout the Glen Lake/Crystal River Watershed provide opportunities to implement LID.

How would a watershed overlay district impact existing development?

Most of the existing development in the Glen Lake/Crystal River watershed occurs along the lakeshore. The proposed watershed overlay district requires that shoreline vegetative buffers be maintained and discourages the construction of hardened seawalls. However, pre-existing, non-conforming uses would be allowed to continue. This is sometimes referred to as “grandfathering.” For example, if you currently have a hardened seawall, you would not be required to remove it. Or, if you do not currently have a shoreline vegetative buffer you would not be required to create one. The overlay requirements would only apply to future development.

How would a watershed overlay district impact future development?

It would provide a mechanism to review development plans to ensure steps have been taken minimize environmental impacts. The watershed overlay district contains provisions that prevent excessive clearing of land and promote the retention of natural vegetative cover along ridgelines and hill tops. It also requires that plans be developed to address stormwater runoff on steeply sloped lands and incorporates LID design concepts that promote natural infiltration of stormwater.

Would a watershed overlay district be a burden on the townships and the community at large?

The watershed overlay district has been designed to be realistic, implementable, and enforceable. The watershed overlay district would not place an unreasonable burden on the townships or landowners in the watershed.

What’s next?

At this time, educational information is available in the form of video, audio and print, and meetings with local planning and zoning officials are planned to highlight the overlay district concepts.