

The Miracle Mile: How DL's City Beach came to be

By: Lynn Hummel | Jun 11th 2019



Picture-perfect weather brought big crowds out to Detroit Lakes and its City Beach on Wednesday afternoon – many of them choosing to stay for the Independence Day fireworks show that evening as well. (Vicki Gerdes / Tribune)

In the beginning there was chaos. It was ugly. During the period between 1940 and 1960 the shoreline of Little Detroit Lake along West Lake Drive deteriorated rapidly. A small area near the city campgrounds was the only place that had limited use for swimming.

City storm sewers had deposited tons of silt into the lake. There were extensive weed growths throughout the shoreline areas, most intensely near storm sewer outlets. Broken concrete slabs were laid along the banks intending to prevent erosion. There were steep banks along the water's edge leaving no flat shoreline areas that could be used as a beach. Some property owners on the north and west of West Lake Drive claimed ownership and preferential rights to the use the shoreline for docks. But they did not wish to assume the responsibility of removing debris or maintaining a clean shoreline. As a result, the beach was unsuitable for swimming, boating or other recreational use.

In 1960, Detroit Lakes Mayor A. R. "Al" Johnson appointed a planning commission to study a possible lakeshore improvement project and estimate the cost. The first step of the study consisted of sounding the entire beach area to determine existing conditions. This work was done during the winter as it could more practically be done from the ice. The depth of the water was made at sampling points and soil bearings were made to determine the depth of silt and muck. These measurements were made 300 feet from the shoreline. Shoreline topography and elevations of such factors as streets, sewer outlets, trees and other topographical details were considered in developing a baseline.

Studies indicated that for a project to be successful and affordable it would be necessary to prevent storm sewer from entering the lake. That meant that an interceptor storm sewer and pumping station be constructed to direct storm water to a non-recreational course which would require a new pipe of a 48 inch diameter installed below the lake water level and a 2-pump pumping station with a total pumping capacity of 18,000 gallons per minute.

The rebuilding of the shoreline and establishment of a beach area required a space wide enough from the location of the underground interceptor storm sewer and the recreational beach side by side. The actual construction would require large volumes of sand, gravel and fill material, some of which would be hauled in and some from dredging. After earthwork, dredging materials and gravel fill, the area would require landscaping which would include sodding, seeding, irrigation, sidewalk, curb and gutter, street lighting and pedestrian seating.

The engineering study consultants submitted a preliminary plan and an estimated cost of \$250,000 to complete. In 1960, a \$250,000 expenditure for a city the size of Detroit Lakes would have been considered huge and the city council felt a bond issue in that amount would have been nearly impossible to get voter approval. Government programs to assist in favoring such a project were not in existence at that time.

As a last resort, the city council approached the city water and light commission to determine whether that independent arm of the city could make funds available for the project. The commission agreed to sponsor the project.

The next step was to approach the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for its approval of the project. The department was hesitant as there had never been a lakeshore improvement project of this nature before. Their major concern was ownership of the land between West Lake Drive and the lake. There were conflicting descriptions of the properties to the north and west of that street. Some descriptions extended across the roadway to the water's edge while others did not include the lakeshore strip. The city and the DNR were concerned about the possibility of legal problems with so many property owners being affected.

Previous lawsuits over the ownership of this land indicated that condemnation would be long, difficult and expensive. Ultimately, resolution was achieved by obtaining quit-claim deeds from the property owners to the City in exchange for limited easements for dock and boat usage to the owners. All property owners cooperated and the issue of property ownership and use was resolved.

Finally, after three years of negotiating with property owners and the DNR, the DNR approved the project and actual beach construction could proceed. The final plans and specifications were prepared by Larson-Peterson and Associates, Detroit Lakes city engineers and the project was advertised for bids. In 1965 a contract was awarded for the construction of the interceptor storm water and storm water pumping station in the amount of \$164,279.64. The Lakeshore Improvement Project was about to become a reality after five years of planning and negotiations.

The first step in the project consisted in hauling gravel to the lakeshore to provide space for the intercept storm sewer and to be used for diking in conjunction with the dredging portion of the project. This required thousands of yards of material.

The storm sewer pumping station was constructed west of the sport arena, now named Kent Freeman Arena after Kent Freeman who served as Mayor of Detroit Lakes from 1965 to 1981 and was a major figure in promoting and driving this project to approval and completion. The outfall sewer was directed to a ditch west of the Soo Line Railroad tracks. A 48 inch wide concrete pipe was constructed from the pumping station through the fairgrounds and along Rossman Avenue to the lakeshore easterly to intercept existing storm sewer outlets to the drain east of the Pavilion.

The next phase of the project was the dredging of the lake bottom. This operation served two purposes, namely, to remove silt from the lake bottom and to provide material for the beach. A dike was constructed with excess sand and gravel from the storm sewer construction. The dredged material was pumped behind the dike and the dredge water flowed over temporary dams. The silt settled in the fill area and the water flowed to the storm sewer. The dredging operation provided sufficient material to shape the beach to the desired contour. The beach was then covered with fine, washed and screened sand.

A sidewalk was constructed along the entire beachfront for pedestrian use and to separate the sand beach from the grass boulevard. The boulevard was provided with an irrigation system with water pumped from the lake. The boulevard area has a clay base over the sand fill, then covered by black dirt, sodding and seeding. West Lake Drive was widened and concrete curb and gutter were constructed. The Detroit Lakes City Water and Light Department installed a complete street lighting system.

The project required two years to complete. The storm sewer and pumping station phase was completed in the summer of 1965 and the dredging and beach building phase was completed in the spring of 1966. The entire development was complete and in use by the summer of 1967.

The beach achieved immediate acceptance by the public. It became known as the 'Miracle Mile,' and became an attraction for thousands. It was perhaps the greatest tourist attraction since the days when steamboats chugged across the lakes. The city received great publicity for this improvement.

The Minnesota Society of Professional Engineers named the project one of "Seven Wonders of Engineering in Minnesota" for 1968 and recognized city engineer Winston Larson for his vision, engineering designs and leadership in developing this project. The Society summarized the project as follows:

"The resort town of Detroit Lakes has about one and one-half miles of shoreline on a lake within its corporate limits. In recent years, lakeshore deterioration, increased weed infestation and changes in water purity caused serious local concern. Eight years ago the city began planning the restoration and improvement of the property. This involved removal of vast accumulations of silt and muck by dredging, construction of an interceptor storm sewer system to divert the city's run-off water away from the lake, and a public waterfront area with a mile of

sand beach and a mall with sidewalks, grassy boulevard, underground watering system, curb and gutter, bituminous surfacing and launching area for boats. Further refinement is planned with lights, patios, benches and additional landscaping. Cost of the \$250,000 project was drawn entirely from the city's own Public Works Department, which operates the electric utility without recourse to federal funds, bond issues or a raise in local taxes."

Fifty one years later, the beach is still a Miracle Mile. It is used and enjoyed by thousands from May through October. Folks without access to other beach or swimming areas come there all summer for picnics, family get-togethers and reunions. Walkers and joggers get their workouts there daily. Sunbathers get their tans there. Tons of residents and tourists bring their lawn chairs and blankets to the beach and sit shoulder to shoulder for ringside seats at the annual Fourth of July fireworks display. We all own it. This beach was made for you and me.

This is one of a series of articles about the culture and various features of Detroit Lake. Lynn Hummel is a retired Detroit Lakes attorney who pens the weekly "Pony Express" column for the Tribune's opinion page.



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The Bash on the Beach concert, featuring Hairball, drew roughly 2,300 people to the Detroit Lakes City Beach in 2018. The beach concert is another event canceled due to COVID-19 in summer 2020. (Gene Lof / Dr. Drone Aerial Images)

<https://www.dl-online.com/news/4624475-miracle-mile-how-dls-city-beach-came-be>