

## Bone Lake Management District 2025 Focus Group Meetings Report

The Bone Lake Management District hosted three focus groups in late May and early June of 2025 to better understand people's top priorities for the lake, opportunities to address priorities, if they've made changes on their property and whether BLMD influenced those changes, and volunteerism. This input will be used in developing a survey of property owners as well as considered by the comprehensive lake management plan advisory committee to update plan goals and strategies.

The average number of participants was eight per group with 24 total participants. Nineteen were property owners. Four were heirs to property owners. One was a recreational user of the lake. Four of the 24 participants were under 45 years of age.

The information gathered from these discussions reflects the participants' opinions, interpretations, and experiences. The information has not been verified for factual accuracy. This summary report provides a snapshot of opinions from groups of individuals who volunteered to participate.

### Favorite thing about Bone Lake

Ten people cited ***the relaxing, peaceful environment*** of the lake as their favorite thing about Bone Lake. People mentioned the slower pace, easy strolls, Sunday evenings and the quietness of weekdays, a place to recharge, being on the water during the calm moments, and the overall calming effect being at the lake provides.

The next most mentioned favorite thing about Bone Lake was ***its nature***. For instance, the natural look of the lake and particularly the North End. People enjoy the wildlife and birds of prey, and they especially enjoy the loons. One person said Bone Lake is "magical" with its wildlife, sunsets, sunrises, and people.

Six participants mentioned ***the recreational opportunities*** as their favorite thing about being on the lake: boating, bike riding, swimming, water skiing, and the overall diversity of activities.

People also mentioned ***family time and socializing*** as well as ***fishing***.

### What are your top three priorities related to Bone Lake?

The following is a list of priorities raised by focus group participants.

- Protect and improve water quality and clarity
- Stop shoreline erosion
- Enforce boating laws
- Reduce noise pollution
- Improve the fishery
- Maintain the beauty and nature
- Maintain and improve public access
- Limit or prohibit high density housing
- Protect against invasive species

- Reduce light pollution
- Regulate short-term rentals
- Wake boats damage property and habitat
- Use storytelling to educate
- Enforce zoning laws; i.e., boat houses
- Maintain recreational uses
- Increase social opportunities
- Maintain a consistent lake level

Maintaining, improving and protecting **water clarity and quality** was often cited as a high priority concern for Bone Lake. The District should reduce unsanitary conditions caused by human, pet and goose waste entering the lake. Swimmer's itch is an unaddressed problem on Bone Lake. We should reduce or eliminate run off, especially from fertilizers and herbicides. Bone Lake was mentioned to have clean water compared to neighboring lakes.

**Shoreline erosion** was a top priority for many participants. It is seen as a severe and serious problem that is getting worse in recent years. What is the definitive cause and what can be done to mitigate both ice damage and high impact waves? There was a sentiment that the DNR does not do enough.

Participants mentioned the **enforcement of boating laws** as a priority. Boaters need to be educated and follow existing laws. There needs to be enforcement and ramifications when laws are violated and BLMD commissioners should support this. Wake boats were mentioned as causing unsafe conditions that aren't policed.

Participants also talked about **noise**, particularly very loud music, as disruptive and impeding their enjoyment of the lake. Noise travels easily across the water. Personal watercrafts driven upwards out of the water also contribute to nuisance noise.

**Improving the fishery** was a priority for some people. Several discussed wanting to see larger panfish. People need to better understand issues regarding walleye stocking in Bone Lake. The variety of fish species is good and should be maintained.

Another important issue is to **maintain the beauty and nature** of the lake by keeping the shoreland and lake in a more natural state. The perceived loss of loon population is a concern. Could more be done to attract mating pairs and protect nesting sites? Reduce the use of chemicals in and around the lake.

Participants stated that maintaining and improving the **public access** was a priority; for instance, making improvements to the landings to reduce repairs, adding a playground or beach area for families, and making the boat landings wider and deeper. There was concern that owners and heirs may be priced out of lake property ownership. It was also mentioned that property owners foot the bill for protecting the lake but visiting lake users pay nothing.

Another important concern was limiting or prohibiting **high density housing** on the lake.

Protecting against new and controlling existing **invasive species** was discussed as priority. The landings should be patrolled to keep invasives out of Bone Lake.

Other top concerns for some focus group participants included light pollution (very bright lights left on overnight affecting nature and neighbors), short term rentals, damage from wake boats, using storytelling as an educational tool, enforcing zoning ordinances on boat houses, maintaining recreational uses, increasing social opportunities, and maintaining a consistent lake level.

### **Can you identify the biggest challenges or best opportunities to address one of your priorities?**

Participants identified opportunities and challenges for many priorities:

- Ways to reduce shoreline erosion
  - Install breakwaters to prevent damage from high impact waves.
  - Develop more natural shoreline options to hold the ground in place.
  - Create a test pilot project that shows what happens with half lawn and half natural area.
  - Measure the results from native garden plantings and natural shorelines.
  - Natural lake shore is important: provide ways to support this including changing the narrative, sweeten the incentive, promote via informal social channels.
  - Do a large project and invite people to watch—like a group demonstration.
  - Teach folks how to do things on their own.
- Opportunities for better or more effective communication
  - Increase opportunities to influence decisions versus only at an annual meeting.
  - Educating the next generation and weekend visitors by making communications go viral thru TikTok and Instagram.
  - Disseminate lake map and resources to new owners.
  - Do more things midweek and don't assume Saturday mornings are best for everyone.
  - Develop YouTube videos.
- Challenges to and opportunities for better enforcement
  - Need to rely on the Polk County Sheriff but they are not often on the lake. Desire for increased presence and consistent enforcement.
  - Create a citizen enforcement group to help police Bone Lake. When escalation is required, have a process for that.
  - Employ a seasonal, part-time reserve deputy sheriff.
  - The burning of illegal items is a problem.
  - Need to enforce shoreline rules regarding development.
  - Need to enforce existing ordinances and laws.
  - How are we going to stop people from getting too close to the harvester?
- Challenges with nature and wildlife and opportunities to protect it
  - Encourage and promote wildlife and natural habitats over mowed lawns through outreach and education.
  - Tell a story like what was observed in natural areas.
  - Catalog the bugs, butterflies and living beings in natural areas.
  - Extend no wake zone especially around small island.

- Educate people either on Facebook or with signage about the wildlife here including the variety of fauna that we have and what they do.
  - Some of nature is not great: geese, swimmers' itch.
- Opportunities to protect or improve water quality/clarity
  - CLP removal does not contribute much to reducing phosphorus.
  - Find and flag nonconforming septic systems or properties violating septic system size.
  - Install a sewer system for entire lake.
  - One challenge is to identify the brown muck and its source along the shoreline on the southwest side that gets worse as summer progresses.
- Opportunities for socializing
  - Do more things to develop community: bike rides, gatherings at public places, sports, promote ways to meet others.
  - Facebook is a way to disseminate lake communications and opportunities.
  - Promote communication and community and ways to meet people.
  - Most socialization happens on Balsam Lake where there are community events, concerts, restaurants.
- Improving the fishery
  - Muskies are nice but this angler would rather have larger pan fish.
  - Identify why do our crappies, perch, and sunfish stay small so we can increase the size of pan fish.
  - Why can't walleye be stocked on Bone Lake.
- Opportunities for improved leadership
  - Encourage the more frequent turnover of the commissioners
  - Provide better communication regarding how the board spends money. There is a perception that money is only spent on the same old things.
  - How to better respond to ideas so there is increased transparency of what ideas are/are not pursued and why/why not. For instance, like charging non-resident lake users.
  - Have a county representative at town meetings.
  - BLMD commissioners should go to county and town meetings.
- Opportunities to reduce the negative effects of wake boats
  - Charge for this activity and develop a fund to help repair the damage they do.
  - Continue education about wake boats as this has had a positive impact.
- Other opportunities
  - BLMD could buy land to control density around the lake.
  - Regulate property owners who routinely host 25-35 guests over a weekend.
  - Have a minimum stay requirement for short-term rentals like a week versus 2-3 days as well as a minimum age of 25 years old and limiting the number of occupants and guests.
  - Install a dam on Fox Creek to regulate the water level.

**What changes, if any, have you made to your Bone Lake property to protect the lake? Did BLMD influence or provide support for your efforts?**

Many of the property owners in the focus groups have adopted one or more of the following practices: left a berm created by ice push, left several feet of the shoreline to naturalize, stopped mowing all the way to the shoreline, stopped maintaining a sandy beach, planted wildflowers and native species, replanted lost or dead trees, left cattails and reeds in the water, stopped the use of fertilizers and herbicides, practiced “no-mow May”. Many cited the BLMD communications as influencing these practices.

Other efforts property owners have made include opening only 13% of shoreline with the rest left natural, picking up trash on the roads and in the park, maintain a pond to slow runoff, and leaving artesian springs in their natural state. Two owners had updated their sanitary system.

One owner discussed having a native species garden but it required too much maintenance and came to look like weeds, so it was mowed down. Another owner was concerned about being a “bad neighbor” if the lawn is not mowed.

There was some frustration around too many regulations that limit what options are available for shoreline stabilization. Perhaps less restrictive DNR requirements would allow for more things to be tried. It was suggested that a more balanced option be found—one both friendly to people and wildlife—something in between manicured lawn and natural.

There were suggestions that BLMD encourage folks to do something different with their land and BLMD communications are critical. Participants were favorable toward the newsletter, web site, Facebook, and landing work. The information in the newsletter was highlighted as a key in influencing property owners. Some expressed that BLMD is doing good work. One person had not heard of BLMD. One person suggested BLMD could provide dollars to replace lost trees.

**Have you participated in Bone Lake activities or volunteer opportunities? Which ones? Or, why not?**

Seven of the participants indicated they have attended an annual meeting; five of whom have done additional work like greeting, helping with check in, distributing ballots, or taking minutes.

Five participants have volunteered to serve on a committee like the wildlife and natural beauty, alum, nomination, or high water.

One participant had volunteered for the Clean Boats Clean Water program, one had been the administrator for the Facebook page, one had volunteered with the Lions Club and Don Langel Park, and one has been a lake level monitor. Three people mentioned having participated in the boat parade and fireworks in some way.

Nine of the focus group participants indicated they had not previously volunteered because they lacked information on how to volunteer, knowledge of what opportunities were available, and what was required to be a volunteer; for instance, time commitment, property ownership, local availability, what skills are needed, what’s the objective, are meetings electronic.

Some folks may not want to volunteer as the lake is their relaxation place. Volunteering may also be “stage of life” dependent where it’s easier to volunteer if you don’t have young kids at home and/or less demands from work.

There was interest in one-time opportunities, being able to volunteer without being on a committee, or looking over a list of opportunities to find a fit.

Perhaps the District should identify where the engaged people are on the lake; maybe some neighborhoods are more connected than others.

The newsletter would be a good place to promote volunteer opportunities, but it may require more than one ask before getting a response.

Three people indicated that they have offered to volunteer but received no follow up from BLMD.

**Is there anything related to Bone Lake or the Bone Lake Management District that you want to share?**

There was positive feedback about the overall communications from the District. One found the newsletter impressive—nicely formatted with a good balance of information and nature articles. One shared that the annual meetings are excellent for content. People appreciate the e-news emailed messages.

Several people expressed their gratitude to the commissioners and their knowledge and work to protect Bone Lake.

The Facebook page is probably a good place for BLMD to share content, perhaps with links to the website. Visitors and family seem to really use the Facebook group.

Georgetown will no longer plow the private road as its not wide enough. This can create a problem and hazard for residents.

When expressing concern that the WI DNR is not doing enough to combat the destruction from wakeboarding, a participant asked, “What can BLMD tap into that can influence the DNR?”

Two suggestions were made about communications: (1) publicize opportunities to get people to step up and do three or more communications about an opportunity, and (2) provide small group opportunities to hear from property owners.