

# Guest Feature

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## The Great Lakes and the citizen stewards of Michigan

By Senator Ken Sikkema

One of the most rewarding opportunities that awaits a legislator in Michigan is the chance to venture out into the state to find out what the citizens truly want to see enacted in state policy. Whether the issue is crime control, education, welfare or tax reform, protecting the environment, or any other significant matter, the people of Michigan provide a wellspring of information and inspiration for policymakers.

Over the course of the last several months, as Chairman of the Great Lakes Conservation Task Force, I have had the distinct pleasure to experience the significance of two of the state's most important resources — its people and the natural resources of the Great Lakes. At the conclusion of the eight public hearings held in all corners of the state and the submission of our report, the Great Lakes Conservation Task Force completed its assignment of going out into the public and assessing the needs and concerns of the people of Michigan on Great Lakes conservation matters. The report we have provided details an aggressive plan, as drawn up by the citizens of the state, to protect the Great Lakes for years to come. It was the vision and the passion of our people that allowed the Task Force to fully discover the importance of the natural resources of the Great Lakes.

The report, formally released to the public on January 16, is available in both hard copy and on various web sites, including my site at [www.sikkema.org](http://www.sikkema.org). (Click on the "Press Releases" link and scroll down.) Although the report contains a thorough discussion of 17 significant issues facing the health of the Great Lakes, there were several critical issues which should become priorities for early legislative action. Chief among these issues are concerns over large water withdrawals which threaten both the quantity and quality of our waters, sewage overflows which regularly impact water quality, the presence of aquatic nuisance species which upset the ecosystem in the Lakes, repeated beach closings and the lack of adequate water quality monitoring, and the concern over drilling for oil and gas along the Lakes. The consensus of the bipartisan Task Force is that these issues must be addressed in an expedited fashion in order to avoid risking continued damage to the health of the Lakes.

Among other important points raised in the report, there was significant attention paid to the state's need to more effectively support the various public advisory councils that are doing outstanding work in helping to clean up the 14 Areas of Concern (AOC) found in the state. The Task Force heard repeatedly about the great successes accomplished under the guidance of the public advisory councils through the enlisting of both public and private sector support. The commitment made by the members of these advisory councils and the various partners engaged in the cleanups

spurred the Task Force to make several critical recommendations in the report.

Written testimony provided to the Task Force by Kathy Evans, chair of the Statewide Public Advisory Council, called first for the state to acknowledge

the importance of the AOC program and to provide more support from the Department of Environmental Quality. Secondly, Ms. Evans believes that there needs to be more support for local public advisory committees. As locals make commitments of their time and talents, the state must provide more resources to maximize these efforts. Finally, the state needs to search out all available state and federal funds to address the financial needs of the AOC program. These crucial needs were appropriately included in the final action agenda contained in the report.

The timetable for action on this agenda is made more imminent by the nature of these risks. With the presentation of the report, this action agenda has become the basis for immediate discussion by the Michigan Senate.

The Great Lakes have sustained us and our way of life for many generations, and we have not always shown them the respect and care that they deserve. The partnership between the people of the state and its legislature has devised a plan to care for the Great Lakes. The steps must be taken and taken now to carry out that plan. ♦

*Elected in 1998, Ken Sikkema is a Republican Member of the Michigan Senate. He serves as chairman of the Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Committee and vice-chairman of the Technology and Energy Committee. He also serves as a member of the Government Operations Committee, the Reapportionment Committee, and the Legislative Council. Most recently Senator Sikkema was appointed chair of the Great Lakes Conservation Task Force.*

