

Lake St. Clair Conference
March 19, 2008
Remarks of Congressman Sander Levin

Good Morning. I was here yesterday and it was completely foggy, so the weather is improving. Judy Hartwell, our district director, is also here with me today.

Let me say just a few words. This is such an important meeting and I believe you gather with a note of optimism because progress has been made.

When we were growing up with our kids in Oakland County we used to come here. That was some time ago. I don't remember beach closings. We were worried about how many cars were in the parking lot and whether we would be able to find a parking spot if we came to Metro Beach. And then problems began to grow and began to escalate. I think there was a lot of concern about the Great Lake and Lake St. Clair and whether or not we were going to be able to turn around a truly dangerous threat to this unique watershed, unique in the world in many respects. When I began serving in Congress I did not represent an area that was very close to here, but the districts moved and I was happy that I could move with it. Now Representative Candice Miller and I share the territory along Lake St. Clair. As I look about, some of us are old friends. We got to know each other, and the plea that came from both U.S. and Canadian areas that bordered on this lake and the other lakes was that there needed to be some attention to their problems. We needed to recapture the spirit that any damage being done could be turned around. As a result, using hundreds of millions of dollars through the revolving fund, efforts began in Oakland and Macomb counties.

I don't think that most people realize that these two counties, in terms of water, are completely bound. The water runs through these places and it really doesn't matter whether it is one county or another – we have a common stake. And so the revolving fund was an exceptional tool. But there have been efforts to cut the fund and one reason I wanted very much to come today was to urge you to help us to thwart efforts to reduce revolving fund monies. The new budget proposal from the administration suggests some further cuts. It is really inexcusable. What we should be doing is doubling or tripling the amount of money available to communities and counties through the revolving fund. So I've come here today, in a sense to lobby you to lobby us and to join together to try to help in Washington.

You can also reference the management plan, and Dave Bonier before me began to work on this. As mentioned, we were able to provide an authorization in the recent Water Resources Development Act legislation. We had to pass this over the President's veto. It is interesting that this is the only time this has happened related to the environment. We crossed party lines and were able to pass legislation and now we need an appropriation. So again I urge all of you who are in the United States to join together. The four of us, Senator Debbie Stabenow; my brother, Senator Carl Levin; Representative Candice Miller and I have been working to see if we can now have an appropriation to carry out the authorization. It is absolutely critical because otherwise the management plan is not going to fulfill its dream, right? There is a hard fought battle to make it happen but we have to make it more than a piece of paper, it has to drip with money for water.

Also, as you know, a few years ago the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration effort was started and now a few years later we're fighting for an authorization. And, again, on a bipartisan basis, Congressman Vern Ehlers, from the other side of the state, and my brother are lead sponsors on bills to have an authorization so that the federal role will be carried out.

Let me just say a few parting words. I remember the battle over the Everglades. I remember it vividly. And the appeal was that it was a national, indeed in a sense, an international treasure. The Everglades were more than "threatened," they were beginning to disappear. And the appeal from those from Florida was that federal action was required because it was a national treasure. And we joined together and we overcame regionalism and we forgot about party affiliation and what we said was "yes, there had to be federal attention in order to reverse a trend of many years." If we can do that for the Everglades, with this national, international treasure, we ought to be able to marshal all of the resources to bring attention in Washington—as well as Lansing, but surely Washington—and say to everybody "Forget where you live, forget any political affiliation. These Great Lakes and Lake St. Clair need to be sustained and in their original form."

Some of you have heard me say this. My beloved mother, born in Birmingham, Michigan, used to swim in the Rouge River. That is where they swam - in the Rouge River. It was clean. And as industrial Michigan grew we began to ruin it. And so what happened here was this industrial growth that took place in this beloved place, these waters began to be overtaken by what we call progress. But to the lakes it was retrogression. And so I wanted to come very personally with, not a plea, you don't need this; but with a message of both urgency and hope. Because with your help at the local level, with all of your efforts, channeling them here and also to Washington, we are going to fully restore these waters to their pristine form. There is no environmental mission more urgent, and with your help we are going to succeed. Good luck.