

JULY 2009

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Walker Lake PRESERVE

by Tom Hilpert

Jim Morgan is basically related to Walker Lake by marriage. For four generations, his wife's family has been either living on the lake, or vacationing there, with some of them doing both. Walker is just one of the one thousand or so lakes in Otter Tail county, but to the Morgan family, it is home, and home away from home. So, when Morgan heard that a big developer was bidding on a chunk of land on the western shoreline, with plans to put units every one hundred and fifty feet along the water, he was upset. Most people in his situation would be. It was easy to envision a company tearing out trees and cramming as many buildings as possible onto the quiet lake. There might be excessive traffic and extra noise. But for Morgan, it was more than just the fact that the quiet natural beauty of the scene would be tainted. A long row of docks, thrusting into the lake every one-hundred and fifty feet could cause the loss of key fish-spawning habitat.

So far, the story is a pretty familiar one. Nothing stays the same forever, and as much as we find change uncomfortable, it happens. And the truth is, you can't really fight development. For one thing, you almost always lose. However, there are positive sides to development as well. It provides jobs, leads to infrastructure improvements and boosts the local economy. Not only that, but lakeshore development allows more people to experience the "up-north" lifestyle and enjoy the natural beauty of the woods and water. It isn't really fair to argue that once you have it, no one else should.

Jim Morgan realized all this when he heard about the development coming to the western side of Walker lake. He could have thrown up his hands said, "that's life." He could have engaged in a probably-futile effort to stop it. Instead, he took a fresh approach. He knew the land was going to be developed sooner or later. Morgan says, "If we got involved, we could control the impact and influence of what will happen." In effect, he asked himself, "what if I were the developer?"

Instead of envisioning how bad it could be, Morgan began to pursue his own vision of how *good* it could be. He wanted a minimal environmental impact. He wanted it to be a small quiet community where families would feel comfortable and be able to slow down and enjoy the lake. Morgan, along with associates who also have roots on Walker Lake, consulted highly regarded regional experts on the environment to find out how they could do

a development in such a way as to preserve the habitat, the fishing and the views. After forming a company called WLP Development Ltd (WLPD), They went to the seller with their proposal. They were known in the community, and their approach impressed the landowner. They got the deal. And so, the answer to Jim Morgan's question, and the result of his proactive vision, is the **Walker Lake Preserve**.

Walker Lake Preserve sits on more than seventy-five acres on the west side of the lake. For thirty-four lucky families, it will be a low-impact, natural lakeside community in a park-like setting, in the most lake-filled county in the United States. There are sixteen single-family home sites and six plots for twin-homes (meaning twelve homes). At the southern end of the preserve will be a small community of just six town homes. So far, so good. Where there could have been large condominiums, holding perhaps three times as many people, instead will be a small, quiet community.

One of the reasons people want a lake home is, naturally, to enjoy the lake. For a lot of folks this means boating and fishing. Yet Morgan wanted to prevent a long row of habitat-destroying docks. One alternative would be a boat ramp. Of course that would mean owners would have to move their boats to and from the ramp, burning gas, creating noise and traffic, as well as

pollution. WLPD opted instead to create a marina at the southern end of the community, safely away from the best fish habitat. The marina essentially serves as a single dock for everyone. It holds twenty-eight boat slips. Slips are available for permanent purchase by the owners within Walker Lake Preserve. Sometimes, it seems, you can have your cake and eat it too.

As a Common Interest Community, there are additional environmental and ownership benefits to Walker Lake Preserve. The sharing of resources means that they are available for less cost. It also means less of an impact on the surrounding land and water. Two beaches are available in the community. There is a picnic pavilion, playfield and a private community park. In fact, there are forty-four acres of common area. A walking trail, over one half-mile long runs along the lake. This trail may be extended in the future. For now, you can loop back along the quiet dead end road inland.

One common drawback of owning a lake home is that you have to maintain two homes. Lawns need to be mowed both places. Gutters need to be



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1. Entry Monument
2. Model Home
3. Kitchen in model home
4. *Walker Lake Preservation Day* - Opening Cast "Senator Dan Skogen, Representative Bud Nornes, Jim Morgan WLP, Regional Fisheries DNR Manager Henry Drewes, Assistant DNR Commissioner Larry Kramka"



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cleaned, things have to be fixed and serviced. Walker Lake Preserve has a solution to this problem. Owners of town homes and twin homes enter into a maintenance agreement. With less time mowing, cleaning and fixing, they have more time to enjoy the lake and the area. Those who own single family homes also have the option to participate in the maintenance program, or they can do the work themselves if they prefer.

This idea of balancing community ownership, while at the same time, maintaining freedom for individual owners, seems to be typical of Walker Lake Preserve. The shoreline is a community owned resource, with each owner having a proportional share in it. The park, trails and other amenities are similarly shared. Even so, this is no cookie-cutter development. Owners must meet certain minimum standards to build on their lots; however,

these standards are generally simple, reasonable and offer a lot of room for flexibility. "Mainly, we don't want Walker Lake Preserve to become a trailer park," says Jim Morgan. Homes must be natural colors, and be at least one thousand square feet. The roof has to meet a 5/12 pitch requirement. These are smart ideas, which help to preserve property values. But it isn't necessary to build a "mini-mansion" or home that looks exactly like all the others. Owners can choose their own builder, and make their own decisions about what kind of lake home they want.

The freedom, common interest elements, and relatively loose restrictions, combine to make Walker Lake Preserve an unusually affordable option for lake shore ownership. "Single family lots here are being sold for under fifty-thousand dollars," says Morgan. "If you wanted to build a modest, eleven-hundred square-foot home, you could have the entire deal done for around \$180,000." This is in contrast to nearby Otter Tail lake, where bare lots are being sold for \$280,000.

This is ironic, since Walker connects to Otter Tail lake, the largest of the one-thousand lakes in the county at more than thirteen-thousand acres, and most years, rated a top-ten Walleye fishery. The Dead River, in the southeast corner of Walker, provides access. Most of the year it is navigable by boat, though in a dry year, later in the summer, a boater may have to wade and push the vessel over a small sand bar just inside Otter Tail.

Morgan and his group have maintained their priorities. In April of 2007, exactly one year to the day after they received approval from the county for their conditional use permit, they began to plant more than two thousand trees in Walker Lake Preserve and surrounding lands. On August 3rd, 2007, they transferred twenty-one acres to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. This land, including seven-hundred and fifty feet of shoreline, was attached to the neighboring state fish hatchery. It is now used as an aquatic and wildlife management area. The State of Minnesota even recognized Morgan and Walker Lake Preserve Development for their efforts. Governor Tim Pawlenty declared August 24, 2007 to be Walker Lake Preservation Day.

In fact, while there are still lots and town homes available, Morgan feels that he has already achieved many of his major goals. "We have preserved the lion's share of the western side of Walker Lake for future generations," he says. "We have protected the feel and environment of the lake, while also giving other families a chance to experience that area."

For more information, visit WalkerLakePreserve.com



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