

Markham's Swan Lake is back from the brink, showing 'significant improvements' in water quality. But will its largemouth bass survive?

Volunteer group believes the water can be made clean enough for healthy bass to live in if city takes further steps to rehabilitate the former farmer's pond located north of 16th Avenue.



By [Mike Adler](#) Markham Economist Sun
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A trumpeter swan on the shore of Swan Lake in Markham.
Mike Adler/Metroland

It was marketing and a feel-good project: a pair of domestic mute swans was brought each spring to Swan Lake to nest and have cygnets, before going home every fall with the farmer.

This remained an attraction for Markham's gated community of [Swan Lake Village](#) until 2020, but the shallow pond for which it was named was dying.

Brimming with excess nutrients, the former gravel pit was entering a hypereutrophic state, green with algal blooms and cyanobacteria which killed fish and could be dangerous to humans and dogs.

The bacteria, often called blue-green algae, forced the city to admit Swan Lake's water quality was poor, Fred Peters of [Friends of Swan Lake Park](#) said in an interview.



Fred Peters of The Friends of Swan Lake Park hopes Markham councillors can be convinced next spring to continue the man-made lake's rehabilitation.

Mike Adler/Metroland

Five years of work since by the city, along with Friends group volunteers, York University and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) brought Swan Lake back from the brink.

Last year, the Markham reported "significant improvements" in water quality and habitat [were achieved under its plan](#), including lower nutrient levels, better oxygen levels, reduced toxic algae growth, improved water clarity and lower salt levels.

Next May, city staff will release a water quality plan for the next five years.

Peters said Friends believes the water can be made clean enough for healthy bass to live in if Markham takes further steps to rehabilitate Swan Lake. Awarded a \$25,000-grant by Hydro One's Energizing Life Community Fund this month, the group will submit research by experts this fall to support its case.

"The city's been ignoring this area," argued Peters, who said volunteers want Swan Lake to have the same Natural Heritage Network status as Milne Pond and Toogood Pond, which are part of the Rouge River system.

"Everything you see here is man-made," Peters said on a boardwalk off Swan Lake Boulevard, north of 16th Avenue.

The pond, which averages one metre and a half, so an adult could walk most of the way across, "was basically a farmer's pond until 1995," he added.

Unlike Milne and Toogood, Swan Lake is stagnant, and six outflows still wash in stormwater and road salt. It would take \$100,000 to close the outflows and end Swan Lake's stormwater role, Peters said.

In a statement, Robert Muir, Markham's stormwater manager, said Markham has been monitoring and managing Swan Lake since 2013, when a chemical was first used to neutralize phosphorus in its water. More treatments have been performed over the last five years.

On the day a reporter visited, a great blue heron strode along the shoreline. The pond is popular with birders, but the droppings of Canada geese, both resident and migrating, have contributed much of its excessive nutrient load.



Feeding birds at Swan Lake in Markham, where goose droppings have contributed to dangerous algae blooms, is punishable by a fine.

Mike Adler/Metroland

Markham has responded by "hazing" or scaring the geese daily, though Peters said hundreds remain and thousands more can stop there during fall.

Swan Lake contains goldfish, catfish and carp, but the city has tried removing the latter species because they disturb sediment and worsen water quality. The TRCA this May released 500 juvenile largemouth bass they will monitor over time.

The Authority in 2023 successfully removed [invasive phragmites](#) overwhelming other marsh plants and cattails have reclaimed part of the shore. Aquatic water celery was this year and the city observed "other aquatic plants have also started growing in the lake," Muir said.

Late last year, York launched the Swan Lake Citizen Science Lab with the Friends group as a collaborator.

Involving citizens, students and engineers, the lab can monitor changes in the lake over time as well as creating simulations showing possible outcomes, said Prof. Ali Asgary.

Though results are still being analyzed, drone mapping of the lake began in April and should be able to show water temperatures and colour throughout the year.

"We already see a lot of differences over time," Asgary said.



Condominium towers are seen across Markham's Swan Lake. More towers are planned but a volunteer group wants the city to continue improving the health of the man-made water body, which was choked with nutrients for years.

Mike Adler/Metroland

Swan Lake Village didn't grow to encircle the pond as planned. Beyond its western edge, condo towers rise above the treetops. Peters said more and bigger towers are expected soon, perhaps bringing 25,000 more residents to the area through the Mt. Joy redevelopment plan.

A village resident for 16 years, he spotted a trumpeter swan, a species that once had vanished from Ontario, resting across the pond. "We're hoping some will start to reside here and have their babies," Peters said.



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