



**‘It’s been a very successful 20 years’:**

## **Shell Rock River Watershed District celebrates big anniversary**

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Dredging started in summer 2018 on Fountain Lake’s Edgewater Bay under the direction of dredging and marine construction company J.F. Brennan. - Colleen Harrison/Albert Lea Tribune



Representatives from the Shell Rock River Watershed District, Albert Lea Community Education and Barr Engineering begin a canoe ride in October 2011 on Pickerel Lake. A big project the watershed district completed was the reclamation of Pickerel Lake-- Danielle Boss/Albert Lea Tribune



The new Albert Lea Lake dam structure replaced the more than 90-year-old Juglans dam at the outlet of Albert Lea Lake and Juglans Woods. — Sarah Stultz/Albert Lea Tribune

The Shell Rock River Watershed District celebrated its 20th anniversary during its annual meeting Tuesday, highlighting the successes that have taken place since its inception. District Administrator Andy Henschel said in addition to funding that has come in through the half-cent local option sales tax, the district has brought in more than \$50 million in outside funding for clean water and habitat projects. That includes a total of \$16.5 million in state bonding funds for the dredging of Fountain Lake — \$9 million of which was approved this year by the Legislature for the final phase of dredging.

He said it won't be long before the district will begin the permit process with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for the last phase of dredging, which includes the east basin of the lake's main bay, Bancroft Creek and parts of Bancroft Bay. He did not have a timeline on when a dredge would be back in the lake, but said he didn't anticipate the permitting process to take as long as it did previously. Dredging in the first two phases removed a total of 1.2 million cubic yards of material, he said.

Other outside funding the district has received included \$6.15 million for the cleanup of the former landfill at Edgewater Park with the city of Albert Lea, \$1.6 million for the Manchester sewer project and \$21.3 million in grants through the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, among others. Henschel said most of the Lessard Sams money has been used for habitat projects, though it has gone to help with some clean water and flood mitigation projects as well. He said the district is anticipating another \$2 million from the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council in 2024. Henschel also highlighted \$1.34 million in funding the district received from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, most of which was used to develop the One Watershed, One Plan, which aligns local water planning based on major watershed boundaries rather than political boundaries. Several of the major projects completed in the last 20 years were also highlighted, including the installation of fish barriers on Mud Lake and White Lake, retention ponds that were added in the South Industrial Park in 2008, the reclamation of Pickerel Lake in 2009, the installation of the Albert Lea Lake dam and fish barrier in 2014, the Stables stormwater pond with the city of Albert Lea in 2016, the Pickerel Lake dam with Freeborn County in 2017, the Wasmoen wetland restoration in 2019 and the Upper Twin Lake pump station in 2021, as well as others.

The district has also helped fund street sweeping equipment and leaf vacuums with the city of Albert Lea to help clean the streets and has promoted rain barrels and adopting drains throughout the community. Henschel said efforts of the district have restored or enhanced over 5,527 acres of land and over 21,000 feet of stream banks. "It's been a very successful 20 years, and we plan on another successful 20 years," he said. He thanked the board of managers; members of the citizen advisory committee; consultants who have supported the district, including accountants, engineers, lawyers and lobbyists; District 23 Sen. Gene Dornink and District 23A Rep. Peggy Bennett; and residents for approving the sales tax. Before and after the meeting, people in attendance were also able to tour the district's building, at 305 S. First Ave.