

**Testimony of Allegan County Commissioner Dean Kapenga**

**Before**

**House Appropriations Subcommittee on Natural Resources & Environmental Quality**

**January 23, 2020**

**Chairwoman Allor and Members of the Subcommittee:**

My name is Dean Kapenga and on behalf of my fellow Allegan County Commissioner Jim Storey, a member of the Michigan Association of Counties Board of Directors, I appreciate this opportunity to testify concerning the devastating impact the rise of Lake Michigan waters, fueled by high wind storms in October, November and December of 2019, has had on our Allegan County shoreline.

My commission district includes two townships, Saugatuck and Laketown, and two cities, Saugatuck and Douglas, that all have suffered the impact of lake erosion.

These storms have torn out a number of private and public beach access stairways and completely ruined a handicap ramp to the beach at our West Side Park that was installed only a few years ago.

Earlier this week, a home in Ganges Township was torn down to prevent it from tumbling into the Lake and adding even more wreckage to our county's beaches, a well-regarded strip of sand that draws thousands of visitors each summer.

Of most concern to those charged with providing public safety, however, is impact these near record water levels have had on our county roadway system, in particular Lakeshore Drive in Saugatuck Township.

A section of this road is now closed to traffic because erosion has undermined the roadway in two areas and has continued its destruction from earlier storms and periods of high

water. It is in our road commission's estimate an unsafe roadway that must be abandoned, thus stranding a score of beautiful lakefront homes and preventing public safety personnel from reaching them.

In addition to the cost of repairing the road, estimated to exceed \$800,000 by our road commission, or replacing it in a new, more secure location which would cost \$5 million, our drain commissioner's staff has been tasked with removing erosion-caused wreckage from county drains at a cost thus far of \$100,000. It is certain that work will be an ongoing problem in the months ahead as lake levels continue to rise as predicted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Looking forward to this coming spring and even higher water levels, we can expect the carnage of litter along the beaches to continue. This raises the important topic of who will clean it up so as to not endanger navigation and warm weather tourism. This issue of who is responsible should be addressed now with urgency and whichever agency is deemed responsible, be it the EGLE department or local governments, they must be given the resources to act.

In all of this, the value of lakefront property seems certain to decline, thus decreasing property tax collections for schools, local governments, the state itself and other local units such as libraries and senior services.

Our county government has not been idle during this escalating emergency. Our emergency services director, sheriff, drain commissioner, and road commission have given constant attention to the needs of the residents affected by Lake Michigan's eroding shoreline.

Through meetings with both local officials and the general citizenry, we have determined that our ability to meet these escalating costs is beyond local capacity. I would here note that Allegan County taxpayers have consistently since 1968 voted to tax themselves with a road millage to supplement state aid.

Allegan was among the first county in Michigan to do so and remains one of the few to do so to this day. In addition, 23 of our 24 townships' voters have approved supplemental road millages to further support our local infrastructure. In short, we have tried to help ourselves before reaching outside the county boundaries.

Media reporting indicates the state has a \$900,000,000 surplus, including monies that were set aside for road and highway repairs. In this escalating natural emergency, should not these funds be tapped to replace public structures and clean public beaches so damaged by high water erosion?

Our local infrastructure and our economy need the attention and repairs these funds could provide.

Again, I thank you for hearing me today and would be happy to respond to your questions.

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