Editorial: Lake Ontario plan would hurt Orleans

Posted: Monday, July 14, 2014 11:00 am

A plan to return Lake Ontario to “more natural” levels stems from good intentions but fails to address unintended consequences that would hurt Orleans and other south shore counties. The plan as it is now should be rejected. The International Joint Commission needs to find a way to protect the interests of the 10,000 property owners in Orleans and other southern shore counties.

The IJC was tasked in 2000 with finding a way to restore Lake Ontario levels to what they had been before dams and locks were built. The plan currently in effect was adopted in 1958 and controls lake water levels by adjusting the flow of water through a dam on the St. Lawrence River. That adjustment led to some loss of land for properties where homes and businesses had existed since the 1920s and ’30s. However, with lake levels managed, people felt confident enough to build on properties near the shore. They assumed that the water levels of the past would continue. Now, along comes IJC Plan 2014, which would yield a four-inch increase in peak levels in late winter and early spring, and a five-inch decrease in summer and fall. Residents along Orleans County’s shoreline are rightfully concerned.

“At times of extreme high water levels, the damage would be catastrophic — millions of dollars of damage occurring in a single day,” said Orleans County Legislature Vice Chairman Lynne Johnson. “The result of lowered lake levels will be equally as devastating for our $94 million per year sports fishing industry.”

Point Breeze in Orleans County was named the “ultimate fishing town for 2013” by World Fishing Network, and sports fishing is an important segment of the county’s economy. Low lake levels will negatively impact recreational boating and fishing. The higher levels, meanwhile, would threaten not only lakefront homes, but also many of the businesses that have grown up to support the sports fishing public. The only recourse for property owners would be to build new break walls, which can cost $25,000 or more. It must be noted that the loss of property and property values along the lake will shift more of a tax burden for government on other taxpayers in the county.

The plan does benefit some — the return of wetlands will improve duck hunting, for example, and the new levels will increase the amount of hydropower that can be produced at the Moses-Saunders Power Dam near Massena on the St. Lawrence. But, notes Congressman Chris Collins, the bylaws of the IJC should disqualify the proposal due to its adverse effects in Western New York.

“No plan should disproportionately impact any single community without some compensation or remediation,” Mr. Collins said. “Plan 2014 absolutely disadvantages Wayne, Orleans and Niagara counties. When you ask the IJC, and we have, what are your mitigation plans, remediation? They have none, and they don’t seem to be bothered by that in the least.”
The comment period for the plan has ended. Comments and other information may be viewed at the website http://ijc.org/en_/los/home. A state Department of Environmental Conservation spokesman said the state is reviewing the proposal and continues to discuss it with those who live, work and vacation along the lake.

Stopping the plan now may be up to Gov. Andrew Cuomo. Mr. Collins said Gov. Cuomo can scuttle the plan even if it is approved in Washington and Ottawa. The governor has talked about the importance of fishing and hunting to New York state’s economy. He needs to listen to the people in Orleans and other southern shore counties. This IJC Plan 2014 benefits others at their expense. They deserve the governor’s consideration.