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Health of Higgins Lake Initiative Marks One Year of Progress

Volunteer-driven effort engages 50+ community members, builds scientific database, advances septic ordinance, and pursues state grant funding

GERRISH TOWNSHIP, MI — Nearly one year after Gerrish Township launched the Health of Higgins Lake (HOHL) initiative, the community-led effort has made significant strides in understanding and protecting one of Michigan’s most treasured natural resources. With more than 50 active volunteers, a growing body of organized scientific data, a draft septic ordinance under review, and a state grant application submitted to the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE), the initiative is delivering on its promise to take a comprehensive, science-based approach to lake health.

A Community Responds

Gerrish Township formally established the HOHL initiative in early 2025 after decades of studies pointed to a decline in lake quality. Rather than pursuing any single solution, the Township designed HOHL to bring together residents, scientists, and stakeholders to first build consensus on the actual condition of the lake before discussing remedies. A five-member Steering Committee—since expanded to seven members—was appointed to guide the work, and community volunteers were recruited to serve on specialized subcommittees covering science, septic systems, road ends, communications, IT, and funding.

Key Accomplishments

Scientific Research Database: The Science Committee has assembled a central, searchable database containing more than 40 studies on Higgins Lake’s health, with each study reviewed and tagged for easy retrieval. Seven science subcommittees are now conducting focused evaluations across areas including nearshore water quality, invasive species, groundwater and drinking water, watershed quality, changing fisheries, deep water quality, and recreational activities.

Invasive Species Assessment: The Science Committee has catalogued seven known aquatic invasive species in Higgins Lake and is working with partners including the Higgins Lake Foundation and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to assess current control efforts such as DASH boat harvesting, targeted treatments, and prevention measures.

Septic System Initiative and Draft Ordinance: The Septic Committee has partnered with the Central Michigan District Health Department (CMDHD) on the “Purple Dot” project to digitize well and septic records for properties in the Higgins Lake watershed. This data is being integrated into a new mapping system that will allow the Township and community to visualize the number, location, density, and condition of septic systems around the lake and identify areas where information is missing. A draft septic ordinance—developed in collaboration with CMDHD—has been submitted to the Steering Committee for review.

Road End Evaluations: The Road End Committee has completed GPS data collection for road ends in both Gerrish and Lyon Townships, building on evaluations originally conducted by the Roscommon County Road Commission in the 1990s and updated in the 2010s. A summary report is being prepared for the Road Commission to determine next steps for addressing runoff into the lake.

EGLE Grant Application: In December 2025, Gerrish Township submitted a \$40,000 Watershed Council Capacity grant application to EGLE to support community outreach and education, systematic assessment of 3,700 septic systems, and development of IT infrastructure for data management.

Communications and Community Engagement: The Communications Committee has launched a website (HOH-lake.org), a monthly newsletter called “The Ripple Effect,” a companion “Committee Reflections” update, active social media outreach, and community presence through yard signs, business cards, banners, and events.

IT Infrastructure: The IT Committee has established a secure, cloud-based collaboration platform using Nextcloud for all committee work, partnered with the Science Committee to organize research libraries, and developed mapping tools to support the Septic Committee’s data visualization needs.

Looking Ahead

As HOHL enters its second year, the initiative will continue to advance its science-based evaluations, pursue additional funding opportunities, and expand community outreach. Science subcommittee reports are expected to begin reaching the Steering Committee this spring, and plans are underway for summer presentations to lake associations and community groups.

“The response from this community has been extraordinary,” said Jennie Walker, Chair of the Health of Higgins Lake Steering Committee. “More than 50 volunteers from diverse professional backgrounds have committed their time and expertise to this effort. We are building the foundation for informed, consensus-driven decisions about the long-term health of Higgins Lake, and we are making real progress.”

About the Health of Higgins Lake Initiative

The Health of Higgins Lake (HOHL) initiative is a comprehensive, multi-year collaborative effort established by Gerrish Township to evaluate and address all factors affecting the overall health of Higgins Lake—Michigan’s only inland lake with two state parks, welcoming one million visitors annually and serving as headwaters for the Muskegon River, which affects nine downstream counties. The initiative operates under the Open Meetings Act, with Steering Committee meetings held the third Tuesday of each month at 7:00 PM at Gerrish Township Hall. For more information, visit HOH-lake.org or email HOHL@gerrishtownship.org.

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