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Local News

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Groups protest shoreline deal

By **LEO SHANE III**

N-M Columbus Bureau

COLUMBUS -- A coalition of environmentalists and former state officials on Monday called plans for a compromise on private coastal property boundaries an illegal and unethical breach of lawmakers' duty to protect public land.

"Lake Erie and its shoreline belong to all the citizens," said Jack Shaner, spokesman for the Ohio Environmental Council. "This bill is Robin Hood in reverse. It robs from the public and gives to the privileged few."

On Wednesday a House committee is scheduled to unveil the compromise bill, drafted after negotiations with the state Department of Natural Resources and Lake Erie homeowners, who have angrily protested at the Statehouse over the last two months.

Several shoreline property owners, lead by the Ohio Lakefront Group, have charged ODNR with forcing them off land between the lake's high-water and low-water marks. State officials have maintained that area is public land, and anyone building docks or jetties on it must sign a submerged land lease.

The compromise bill is expected to recognize private property owners' rights to the low water mark with certain restrictions on construction and public access.

But Monday's protest called for no change in the current property boundary laws. The coalition presented a letter from four former ODNR directors opposing any such proposal, calling it a risk to the integrity of the lake.

"If there is a problem with the way the permitting system is being managed, than let's fix it," Shaner said. "But we don't need to go to the radical step of turning over the lakeshore."

Larry Mitchell Jr., president of the League of Ohio Sportsmen, predicted more fences and "no trespassing" signs along the shore if the boundary laws are changed.

"That land belongs to us as Ohioans," he said.

But David Carek, president of the lakefront group, said giving property owners rights to the low-water mark would not create new restrictions for the public or allow homeowners to build whatever they desire.

"This does not do anything that would remove regulatory authority over those

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lands," he said. "Those building regulations would still be in full effect."

Carek said lawmakers need to clarify the property lines so land owners aren't forced to pay taxes and leasing fees on the same shore land, as is the case for many homeowners now.

But Elaine Marsh, spokeswoman for Great Lakes United, said those problems aren't reason to turn over ownership of the beaches.

"Over the past 25 years we have spent billions of dollars to restore the lake," she said. "We patrol it; we test it; we pay to protect it. And now they want to take our land. And incredulously the state legislature proposes to help them."

Bill sponsor Rep. Tim Grendell, R-Chesterland, said the land in dispute was bought by property owners and taxed by local agencies, making it private land. He said the compromise bill balances those private property rights and the public's right to the lake.

He also criticized the protest as premature, because the bill's details won't be unveiled until Wednesday.

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