**Ohio pledges to $125 million to rebuild faulty dam at Buckeye Lake**

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Columbus -- The state will invest an estimated $125 million to $150 million to rebuild an earthen dam at a central Ohio lake at risk of a catastrophic emptying.

The project at Buckeye Lake, located roughly halfway between Columbus and Zanesville to the east, could take five years, but the governor said requests for proposals and initial design work would begin immediately.

"I'm making a commitment here today to rebuild -- to build a new dam," Kasich said following a meeting with state and local officials at the Ohio Emergency Management Agency facility in suburban Columbus. "... We will build a new dam at Buckeye Lake."

The lake was established in the 1830s, initially as part of the state's canal system linking Lake Erie and the Ohio River and thereafter used for recreational purposes. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources lists Buckeye Lake State Park as Ohio's oldest state park.

The earthen dam that contains the lake is at a high risk for breach, according to a recent evaluation by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The situation has been aggravated by years of home and other construction in the vicinity.

"This is a problem that should have been addressed 30-40 years ago," Kasich said. "It was basically ignored by previous administrations. ... This is a real structural issue with a possibility of a breach in a dam that could send an 8-10-foot wall of water and mud streaming down the community and killing people. We can't tolerate that. We can't look the other way."

Among other recommendations by federal officials was a plan to drain the lake.

"Frankly, that's inconceivable to me," Kasich said.

During coming construction, water levels at the lake will be kept lower than typical until the new dam is completed, a decision Kasich said was non-negotiable -- the winter pool height will ensure less pressure on the dam.

That means pontoon boats and other no-wake watercraft can still be used on the lake.

"You'll have plenty of water skiing once this is done," Kasich said. "But in the meantime, we don't want to jeopardize anybody's life because we are in any way casual about the circumstance."

The cost of the new dam will be covered via state borrowing as part of future capital bills.

"... We're unified as Buckeyes," Kasich said of spending state resources on the central Ohio project. "I'm spending a lot of time now... trying to figure out how to fix the Youngstown schools. I don't look at Youngstown or Cincinnati or Cleveland or Toledo -- they're all part of one place called Ohio. The more unified we are, the better off we are as a state. ... We hang together, that's what Buckeyes do."

Sen. Troy Balderson (R-Zanesville) said many people from his district, which includes Guernsey County, visit Buckeye Lake on a regular basis or own land in the vicinity.

"This is what needs to happen," he said of the governor's plan. "It's going to be better in four or five years, and it's the right approach. The funding's going to be there to get it done. It's good that the decision's been made."

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