

STATE & LOCAL

Floating Islands a New Environmental Fix

Erin Etheridge, Staff Writer

The next time you visit either Hillandale Golf Course or the Museum of Life and Science in Durham, be on the lookout for floating islands.

The islands, sixteen in total, were launched on Wednesday, March 31 and Thursday, April 1, according to an April 4 News & Observer article written by Jim Wise. The article, titled "Floating islands a pollution solution," explains that the islands are part of an experiment jointly conducted by the City of Durham and North Carolina State University, the aim of which is to observe if the unique products combat nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in bodies of water.

Each island measures four hundred square feet and is composed of green polymer fiber approximately ten inches thick. The structures are also adorned with "obligate wetland plants" that will, city officials and scientists hope, thrive over time. As the mounted plants mature, they should remove harmful nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus from the water.

"It's really simple technology," asserted Rob Crook, a Floating Island Southeast co-owner. "We're just creating an environment for what already exists in nature."

Both nitrogen and phosphorus allow for plant growth and

happen to be the main sources of the pollution in both Falls Lake and Jordan Lake, the two major bodies of water closest to Durham. City officials anticipate saving millions of dollars in future cleanup costs if the sixteen islands, twelve of which are located at Hillandale and four of which are located at the Museum of Life and Science, prove responsive.

"If [they do], you might be able to start seeing more and more of these across the Triangle because it's a relatively easy fix," affirmed North Carolina State University agricultural engineering professor Bill Hunt.

Both groups of islands were placed in ponds which drain into Ellerbe Creek, the tributary of Falls Lake responsible for the highest levels of downstream nitrogen and phosphorus movement.

If the islands show signs of ridding Falls Lake of its excess nitrogen and phosphorus, they could become an option for retrofitting the outdated stormwater-retention ponds still in use, explained Dave Brown, a Durham engineer. The structures would be placed in current retention ponds, thus negating the necessity of new construction or pond re-engineering. Taxpayers could also breathe a sigh of relief, as no more land for new installa-

tions would need to be purchased at their expense.

Montana inventor Bruce Kania developed the floating islands and founded a company to distribute them, Floating Island International LLC, in 2000.

The islands have become a prominent aesthetic feature in the

western United States, for after their attached plants mature they can become a wildlife habitat.

However, the North Carolina islands, which cost approximately \$30 a square foot, are being employed solely for environmental purposes. The year-long test of the units installed in the Ellerbe Creek ponds will cost the City of Durham, the North Carolina Department of



Photo courtesy of Harry Lynch, News and Observer

Environment and Natural Resources and the United States Environmental Protection Agency around \$180,000.

For more information on the floating islands' environmental potential, visit <http://www.newsobserver.com/2010/04/04/420450/floating-islands-a-pollution-solution.html>.

Obama Changes Student Loan Policy

Caitlin Griffin, Staff Writer

On Sunday, March 21, President Barack Obama's student loan act reform bill passed in Congress. Currently, private banks are allowed to administer loans to students and receive federal subsidies in return for their lending services, but the new legislation will ensure that the federal government is the only lender to students.

Supporters of the new student loan act assert that the reformed legislation will save the federal government billions of dollars, because private banks will no longer be allowed to act as "middlemen" between the government and its college-aged citizens. According to the CNN, the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that the federal government will make about \$500 billion in direct loans and generate a net savings of \$62 billion over the next decade. The article also mentions that the House Committee on Education and Labor says the provisions in the reformed student loan act will ensure the reduction of the national deficit by at least \$10 billion over the next ten years.

In contrast, conservative critics of the new legislation cite the student loan act reforms as part of an intrusive government takeover of the student loan system. Bank employees are also outraged, as they predict that thousands of jobs will be lost along with the private student banking industry.

The student loan reform act will officially go into effect on July 1, 2010. Although the reform will not change loans that students have taken out prior to this date, current college students dreading the eventual payback of their loans may be pleased to hear that the legislation will lower the cap on monthly payments from the current 15 percent of discretionary income to 10 percent. The new legislation will also shorten the repayment window from 25 years to 20, after which the balance might be forgiven. President Obama claims that his proposed reform of the federal student loan programs will make college more affordable for students and their debt load more manageable after graduation.

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