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Lake Ontario alert: New IJC commissioners on the way

Steve Orr, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle Published 12:40 p.m. ET Aug. 28, 2018



(Photo: File photo/Annette Lein)

President Donald Trump will nominate new U.S. members of the International Joint Commission, the U.S.-Canada body that oversees the touchy topic of Lake Ontario water level regulation.

One intended nominee, Jane Corwin of Erie County, has previously denounced the commission of which she likely will become co-chair.

The three candidates, as [announced by the White House \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/president-donald-j-trump-announces-intent-nominate-designate-personnel-key-administration-posts-2/\)](https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/president-donald-j-trump-announces-intent-nominate-designate-personnel-key-administration-posts-2/),

are:

- Corwin, a businesswoman and Republican member of the New York state Assembly from 2009 through 2016. She ran unsuccessfully for Congress in a 2011 special election, and worked for years for The Talking Phone Book, a business founded by her father. She also helps run a family foundation. Corwin, who lives in Clarence, Erie County, has been rumored as an IJC nominee for months.
- Robert C. Sisson, a former commercial banker and Republican mayor of the small Michigan city of Sturgis. He now is president of [ConservAmerica \(http://www.conservamerica.org\)](http://www.conservamerica.org), which describes itself as "a non-partisan national organization that creates new solutions to environmental issues that have become gridlocked by partisanship."
- Lance V. Yohe of North Dakota. He holds a biology degree, is a former Lutheran pastor and was the long-time chair of the [Red River Basin Commission \(https://www.redriverbasincommission.org/\)](https://www.redriverbasincommission.org/). That commission promotes cooperative water management in the basin, which includes parts of Minnesota and North Dakota and the Canadian province of Manitoba.

Nominees to the IJC must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate before assuming their posts.

The commission, which consists of three U.S. members and three from Canada, oversees the boundary waters between the two countries and can become involved in environmental and water-use matters.

In this region, the IJC is best known for its oversight of Lake Ontario water-level regulation.

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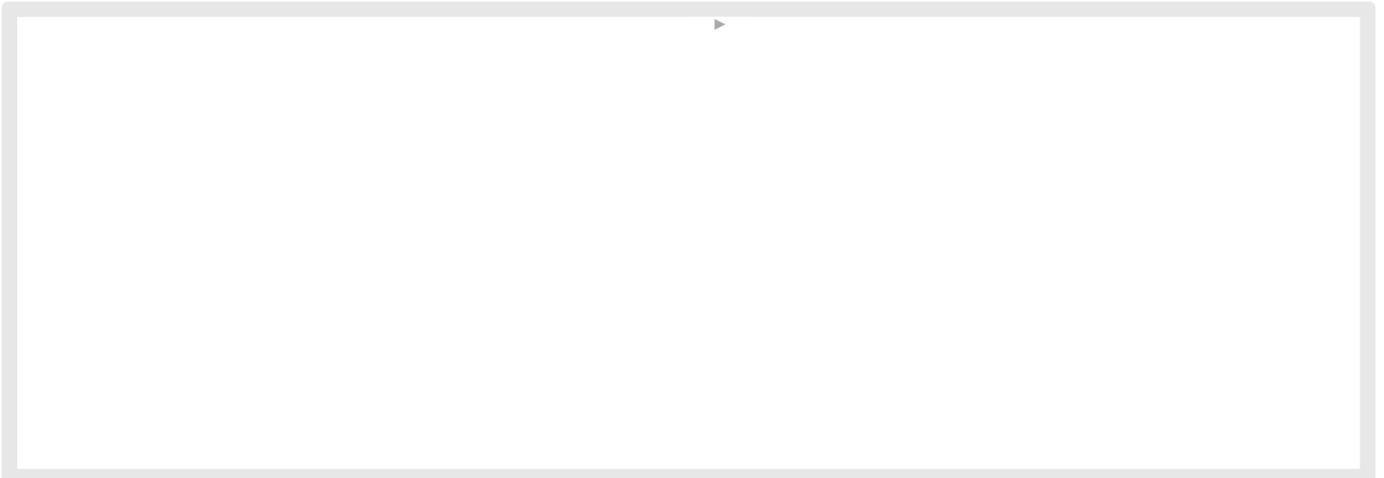
Three empty chairs alongside a still Lake Ontario at Durand-Eastman Beach in Rochester. (Photo: Tina MacIntyre-Yee/@tyee23/staff photographer)

Lake levels have been a contentious topic since 1960, when completion of the St. Lawrence Seaway and related dams made it possible to adjust the flow of water out of Lake Ontario.

Shoreline residents and other interests have complained for decades about the level of water in the lake, often saying the water is too high and sometimes that it is too low.

After years of study, the commission unanimously adopted a new regulatory plan in late 2016 that allowed a more natural variation in the lake level. The federal governments of the United States and Canada also signed off on Plan 2014, as it is known.

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Many welcomed Plan 2014 because it was designed to help restore the lake's natural eco-system, but it has been bitterly opposed by some shoreline residents who believe it may cause more damaging high water.

Their concern was heightened when historic flooding hit Lake Ontario last spring and summer, just a few months after Plan 2014 was put into use. Experts with the IJC and elsewhere said the flooding was due to extreme rainfall and would have occurred regardless of what regulatory plan was in place.

Corwin, 54, would be the chair of the U.S. section, the White House said. Her position is considered full-time and would pay about \$164,000 a year. The other two U.S. commissioners would be paid about \$154,000.

The U.S. commissioners serve at the pleasure of the president. The two sitting IJC commissioners from this country were appointed by President Barack Obama.

The last IJC commissioner from New York was Dereth Glance, an Obama appointee who served from 2011 to 2015. The last New Yorker before Glance was Robert McEwen, an appointee of President Ronald Reagan who served in the 1980's.

There has been agitation by some residents and their political allies for new commissioners who would amend Plan 2014 or replace it with some other regulatory regimen.

When Corwin was in the Assembly, representing a district that included the Niagara County shoreline on Lake Ontario, she was among the Republican political figures who spoke out against Plan 2014.

"The IJC study has a clear bias against the residents and businesses along the southern shoreline of Lake Ontario," she was quoted as saying (<https://chriscollins.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congressman-chris-collins-nys-local-leaders-call-for-harbor-maintenance>) in 2013.

Changing the plan would require the agreement of a majority of the six commissioners and, in truth, an agreement between the Trump administration and that of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

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