

Big Lake at a glance

BY MOLLY MILLETT, *Pioneer Press*

Big Lake describes its ambience as "small town values in a safe, rural setting," but it might become more of a busy, traditional metropolitan suburb if the proposed Northstar Commuter Rail rolls into town in 2008.

The Northstar Commuter Rail would begin in Minneapolis and travel out 40 miles on existing track with additional stations in Fridley, Coon Rapids, Anoka, Elk River and its last stop, Big Lake. Supporters of the rail proposal would like the line to eventually stretch all the way to St. Cloud, easing gridlock on the highways.

Some Big Lake residents want to keep the town's country feel and would prefer not to hook up to the line, or else they would like to consider other traffic congestion solutions; but the majority surveyed support the project, city officials say. The commuter train would bring some new transit-oriented development to Big Lake, such as coffee shops, convenience stores, restaurants and town homes near the station. Beyond that, it could mean more people might be willing to live in Big Lake and work in Minneapolis, 41 miles away.

BIG LAKE

County: Sherburne

Distance to Minneapolis: 41 miles

Location: Big Lake, midway between Minneapolis and St. Cloud at U.S. 10 and Minnesota 25, is located on both Big Lake and Mitchell Lake. It is also the southern entry point for the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge and the Sand Dunes State Forest.

Population (2000): 6,063

Population estimate, current: 8,385

Population estimate for 2030: About 24,000

Township: The city of Big Lake is surrounded by Big Lake Township, which has a population of 7,500. For more information, visit www.biglaketownship.com

Ambience: Big Lake is where many young families move to buy their first homes and raise their small children. The housing is more affordable out here, but commute times can be long.

You gotta go: To Big Lake Spud Fest, Big Lake's annual family celebration, scheduled June 23-26. Events include a carnival, a parade, a pork dinner and a potato pancake breakfast, fireworks, a softball tournament, live music, a home run contest and a mile-long "fun run."

Shopping: Limited: Big Lake residents often head to Elk River, Monticello, Maple Grove, Crossroads Center in St. Cloud or Ridgedale in Minnetonka.

Grocery store: Coborn's Grocery Store came to town, setting up shop in an existing building, but will move into a new

facility twice the current size this summer, along with a detached strip mall that will house stores like a coffee shop, a pizza joint and more.

Northstar line: The Northstar Commuter Rail proposal is for service on the 40-mile segment of existing track along Highways 10 and 47 from Big Lake to Minneapolis. Stations are proposed for Big Lake, Elk River, Anoka, Coon Rapids, Fridley and Minneapolis. In April 2005, Gov. Tim Pawlenty signed a bonding bill that included \$37.5 million for the train. That will leverage \$132 million in federal funds for the project. For more information, visit <http://www.mn-getonboard.com/>

Housing stock: Many starter homes.

New homes: For the past six years or so, the city of Big Lake has added about 160 to 210 homes annually.

Schools: Big Lake School District 727; voters defeated an excess levy referendum last November, so the school district is trying to trim its budget by \$1 million.

Major employers: The school district; Remmele Engineering Inc.; Connections, Etc., the local phone company.

Restaurants: Lake Café, a family-owned, full-service restaurant; Russell's on the Lake, where the specialties are the prime rib, salad bar and the lake view.

Where to find the locals: On the beach at Big Lake or the 25 miles of trails in and near the city.

Area attractions: The Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is home to bald eagles, sandhill cranes, ducks, geese, songbirds and other wildlife. The Blue Hill and Mahnomen Trails, located on County Road 9, provide nine miles of good hiking and songbird viewing in the spring and fall, and cross country skiing in the winter. For more information, visit www.co.sherburne.mn.us/ The Sand Dune State Forest is part of the forests of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, places where you can pick berries, hunt mushrooms, identify wildflowers, take nature photos and hunt. The Sand Dune forest also has campsites, a panfish lake, nature trails, swimming water access and picnic sites. For more information, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/state_forests/index.html

Median age: 28.6

Mean travel time to work: 30.7 minutes

Owner-occupied housing: 84.3 percent

Average family size: 3.23

Average family income (2000): \$54,038

Racial breakdown: White, 96.7 percent; Latino, 1.8 percent; two or more races, 1.3 percent; American Indian, 0.5 percent; Asian, 0.4 percent; African-American, 0.1 percent.

Percentage of population over age 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher: 13.5 percent (compared to national average of 24.4 percent).