

Published January 30 2010

Money needed for river restoration

HASTINGS - A local citizen advisory group has a plan to restore the Mississippi River south of the Twin Cities and slow the demise of Lake Pepin.

By: **Jen Cullen**, The Republican Eagle

HASTINGS - A local citizen advisory group has a plan to restore the Mississippi River south of the Twin Cities and slow the demise of Lake Pepin.

Now they need money to make it happen.

Citizens behind the Mississippi Makeover plan held a public open house Thursday to gather support for the project, which focuses on managing the river in the Hastings area and downstream by building islands, removing rough fish and temporarily lowering water levels to improve water clarity, stimulate vegetation growth and enhance river habitats.

The project includes Spring Lake near Hastings, the Mississippi River above Lake Pepin and the lower Vermillion River - all bodies of water that suffer from poor water clarity caused by sediment, algae and other materials.

If not addressed, the sediment will fill in Lake Pepin in less than 400 years. Officials say the lake is already on track to shrink by two-thirds in about 80 years.

"If every jurisdiction did only one thing and that is take care of the natural resources in their community, the Mississippi River would be healthy and the life of Lake Pepin would be extended," said Katie Himanga, former Lake City mayor and part of the Mississippi Makeover group. "The next step of course is to go out and do something."

The Mississippi Makeover Project is a smaller part of the ongoing Mississippi River and Lake Pepin total maximum daily load study being conducted by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

That study specifies ways to clean up and restore Lake Pepin and the river by determining their pollutant sources.

Officials say much of the solution will require changes to watersheds that drain to the Mississippi River. River management also will play a role.

"We can't just wave a magic wand and have everything be rectified," said Joe Harris, Dakota County commissioner. "But you have to start somewhere."

Clearing up the water will improve fish and wildlife habitat and foster additional recreational activities, officials say.

Rep. Tim Kelly, R-Red Wing, said a healthy river will also bring economic benefits in the form of tourism and jobs.

"The river becomes a highway to us economically," Kelly said.

The economic importance is not lost on Himanga.

"There is no community in Minnesota that is more directly economically impacted by the Mississippi River than Lake City," Himanga said. "Lake Pepin is extremely important to Lake City."

With funding from the MPCA, Dakota County is coordinating the Mississippi Makeover plan with assistance from partners including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Army Corps of Engineers, Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District and others.

Laura Jester, Dakota County watershed conservationist, said officials will work aggressively to secure funding.

"Significant restoration in this area is possible but it's going to take some money," Jester said.