

Group trying to improve Mississippi River quality

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By: **Bonnie St. James**, South Washington County Bulletin

A citizen advisory group and the Dakota County Soil and Water Conservation District are trying to educate the public about the Mississippi River, at least the nearby part of it. They held a public open house last week, calling it “Mississippi Makeover,” to educate and gather support for projects to improve the quality of the river. Two panel discussions at Hastings High School Thursday, Jan. 28, included politicians and citizens from the targeted areas — from Spring Lake to Lake Pepin.

“Old Man River keeps on rollin’ along,” but the river is suffering from poor water quality caused by sediment, algae and other suspended materials, according to officials. The cloudy water is aesthetically unpleasing to people and harmful to fish, wildlife and aquatic plants. And the sediment is contributing to the filling-in of Lake Pepin downstream. It’s estimated sediment will fill in Lake Pepin within 400 years if measures are taken to protect it.

Officials say much of the solution will require changes to watersheds all along the Upper Mississippi River, watersheds that include Spring Lake, the lower Vermillion River, Bullfrog Pond and Lake Isabel near Hastings, according to Phil Vieth, member of the committee.

“These bodies of water are all intertwined with the Mississippi,” Vieth said. “The Vermillion and Mississippi run parallel to each other for a long ways, often separated by inches and a dike (Trudale Dike).

“The Vermillion River used to run behind Bullfrog Pond. But the channel has changed and now it’s going directly into the pond, and Bullfrog Pond is filling in from the high water in the Vermillion. Mud Lake used to be deep and great for fishing, and now it’s shallow with very little vegetation and full of carp. I’ve seen all these changes in the 25 years that I’ve been here.”

The East Hastings Association has long been dealing with the sediment from the Mississippi River as it floods and fills in Lake Isabel. Part of the lake was dredged recently for more depth.

“Seventy percent of the sediment, I think, is coming from the Minnesota River,” Vieth said. “If you look at the Mississippi above that, it’s pretty darn clean. But there’s tons of silt coming downstream, and it drops into the pools above the dams.”

Add to that the drainage ditches built over the years, chemicals (nitrates) from the farms, and runoff from cities (storm water), and there’s a problem.

So, what are the answers?

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is doing a maximum daily load study along the river to determine what the sediment (silt) is doing at various places along the river, identify the pollution problems and target the ecological restoration.

Some of the answers identified by the MPCA and other partners in the effort, according to Vieth, are a working group on the Minnesota River, cutting erosion, encouraging emergent growth and water level control.

“Drawing down the water exposes mud flats,” he said. “It allows plants that emerge from below the water to grow. It’s good duck food and good cover for game fish.”

Creating islands would slow the water — and the erosion.

“When we lowered the water level in Pool 8, near La Crosse, it exploded with life, said Ted Hawkins, with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife, and one of many agencies at the open house. “Now we have 20,000 tundra swans feeding there, and there’s a wild rice bed nearby.”

The emergent plant life deters erosion, according to officials, as does the building of islands.

“The islands stop the turbidity (movement) of water in the open, shallow areas,” Vieth said. “But it’s pretty darn expensive.

“I just want people to understand how intertwined we are to our environment. People have lost the concept of being intertwined with the natural world — we’re not separate from it.”

The issues and the program brought many of the area’s politicians, including Rep. Pat Garofalo, R-Farmington, and Sen. Katie Sieben, DFL-Cottage Grove, who both served on the first panel discussion. Garofalo told the audience he was there to learn because he “wanted his children to enjoy the Vermillion River as he has.”

Sieben said she was glad to see so many who are concerned about the environment.

“I’m listening for ideas to take back to the legislature,” she said. Sieben serves on the Environment and Natural Resources Committee in the State Senate. Dakota County Commissioner Joe Harris also attended the open house.

“We can’t just wave a magic wand and have everything rectified,” Harris said. “But you have to start somewhere.”

Laura Jester, a Dakota County watershed conservationist, said officials will work hard to secure funding for the various projects.