

Kankakee River plan lauded by officials

By Dave Jackson, Journal correspondent

The United States Army converged on the Kankakee area Friday, along with an army of government officials, to unveil details of a blueprint for restoring the Kankakee River.

That blueprint is a melding of plans developed independently by the Soil and Water Conservation Districts of Kankakee, Will and Iroquois counties, plus that of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership.

The plan involves a number of projects including the removal of sediment, restoration of river bank vegetation and wildlife, reduction of pollutants and an increase in recreational areas, among other things.

The plan was lauded Friday by state and federal legislators, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

It will initially be funded by \$997,000 awarded from the state's Conservation 2000 program in January. The "C2000" program authorized the spending of \$100 million for conservation and agriculture by the year 2000.

Beyond that, Gov. Jim Edgar earmarked an additional \$1.5 million in his new budget for work on the Kankakee, but the General Assembly has not yet acted on the budget.

Friday, Lt. Col. Kenneth Harshbarger, of the Army Corps of Engineers; U.S. Rep. Jerry Weller, R-Morris; and State Rep. Phil Novak, D-Bradley, State Sen. Larry Walsh, D-Elwood, plus J.R. Black, chairman of the Kankakee River Basin Partnership, announced the plans at a Bourbonnais country club overlooking the river.

Though aspects of the developing stewardship plan have been reviewed in the press in recent months, Friday's show and tell effort afforded the public an opportunity to view a map locating many of the project's goals.

A feasibility study of project proposals will now be launched.

Most of the problems facing the river today, it was noted, began in the early 1900s when channelization of the river in Indiana reduced the stream's course from a 240 mile stretch into "a fast and straight channel approximately 90 miles in length."

Congressman Jerry Weller, saying that people need to "think globally and act locally," told a group of about 35 that plans can be accomplished the same way that the former Joliet Arsenal was redeveloped: through community-led groups.

"Restoration of the Kankakee river should receive the same priority of restoration as the Florida Everglades," Weller said in a statement following Friday's project review.

Walsh said he is a "firm believer in stabilization of farmland," and noted that state and federal officials are "here to help provide, hopefully with funding, decisions and backing for the various projects."

Novak said he would find no problem in supporting a bill for reauthorization of the C2000 funds.

"When we go back to the General Assembly," Novak said, "we can say to the people of Illinois, whether they live in Kankakee or anywhere else in the state, that these programs work." That track record could help gain legislative support for a possible extension of C2000 benefits into the next century, said Black.

The Bourbonnais Township Park District will be the recipient of some work funded by the C2000 grant.

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Years prior to the park district having ownership of Perry Farm, All-Terrain Vehicle riders wore down some of the river banks at Perry Farm. Funds from the grant will be used for riverbank repair at that location.

In Iroquois County, log jams between Interstate 57 and Lion Creek will be eliminated, as well as additional riverbank stabilization to help prevent future log jams.

Aquatic studies at Lion Creek are also planned.

Three other projects in Iroquois County are also being eyed. One is just southwest of Watseka and the other two are just southwest of Milford. The projects will focus along Sugar Creek, with focus on installing buffers to prevent siltation of the river.

Noting that a good portion of the work will be just east of Momence, Black added that we're "not trying to benefit any one stakeholder. We're trying to benefit all stakeholders."

Steve Engelking, president of the Kankakee River Conservancy District said the C2000 partnership is "trying to establish models for farming and proper techniques that SWCD's would like to see used."

Along with detailed land mapping, new technology including the Global Positioning System, will be used to

help the Illinois Dept. of Natural Resources, as well as the Corps, to determine how various efforts along the river are panning out.

Harshbarger, the only military representative for the Corps, noted that in this current feasibility study of the river, that both the Chicago and the Rock Island Corps districts will be involved.