



Southland towns back Hickory Creek restoration plan

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Ron Sly, public works superintendent for New Lenox, looks over Hickory Creek at Cedar Road where one of the village's water reclamation plants is located Thursday, November 3, 2011. | Brett Roseman-Sun-Times Media

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Hickory Creek winds its way through several Southland towns in the Lincoln-Way area and all the way into Joliet. But unless you live near or fish the creek, chances are you don't think twice about it, until it floods.

But there's a bigger picture, one that has had municipal officials from Homer Glen to Orland Park to Tinley Park to Joliet not only thinking about the creek but putting together a comprehensive plan to restore it and then keep it clean.

At stake are flooding issues, natural habitat, aesthetics and recreational activities in the region, and that's why

the Hickory Creek Watershed Plan was drawn up.

"The overall goal is to get the stream back to where it was, and to keep it from being further degraded," New Lenox Public Works Supt. Ron Sly said.

A watershed is an area in which creeks, streams and even groundwater drain into a common place. The Hickory Creek Watershed includes more than 100 miles of streams — its main tributaries are Spring Creek, Marley Creek, Union Ditch and Frankfort Tributary — and it spans 107 square miles of land.

You should care about the creek if you care about your neighborhood, said Jesse Elam, senior planner for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. He said having clean, high-quality water flowing through the streams is a plus for an area and promotes higher property values.

Decades of urbanization have degraded Hickory Creek, killing off fish and making it unsafe for swimming. But seven towns, plus Will County, the Sierra Club and CMAP have spent the past few years creating a 150-page Hickory Creek Watershed Plan to restore and protect this natural resource.

The plan was completed in June and is being used as a guide to going greener. The parties involved will continue to meet "to make sure we are doing what we said," Elam said.

The regional effort was launched in 2003, when environmentalists objected to an expansion of a New Lenox sewage treatment plant, claiming it was dumping too much phosphorus into Hickory Creek.

Sly, who chaired the planning group, said he since has learned that too many nutrients finding their way into the creek — including phosphorus — produce algae, which cuts off oxygen, killing fish

and insects.

Sewage treatment plants, farm and lawn fertilizers are the main sources of phosphorus, officials said.

New Lenox installed a phosphorus removal system in its plant, but to improve and maintain the overall water quality meant getting everyone in the watershed involved.

New Lenox, Frankfort, Mokena, Tinley Park, Orland Park, Homer Glen, Joliet and Will County all participated in developing the plan for this creek, whose waters flow into the Des Plaines River and ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico.

"I could say Hickory Creek is not my fight, but it makes sense to have a watershed-wide effort to understand the workings of the ecosystem and what could be done to improve it on a regional basis," Tinley Park public works director Dale Schepers said.

Tributaries also drain corners of University Park, Richton Park, Matteson, Country Club Hills and Lockport, providing flood relief, so they are part of the watershed, too.

Tinley Park is home to one of the major tributaries, Union Ditch. Schepers said there are plans to improve the creek crossing and stabilize the stream when Will County widens and reconstructs the 80th Avenue bridge over I-80 in 2015.

Restoring Union Ditch is one of 30 projects recommended in the plan as examples of what towns could do in the next five years to boost water quality, improve aesthetics and reduce flooding and erosion.

The projects range from the simple (installing planter boxes) to the complex (stabilizing creek banks and restoring a stream), all of which are designed to improve water quality and decrease flooding.

While it's not an all-inclusive list, it gets communities started on a greener path, Elam said.

"I hope over time we have significantly improved conditions in the creek as well as newly flourishing aquatic communities," he said.

He hopes the towns embrace green infrastructure and stormwater management, and that they consider porous pavers in parking lots and natural plantings as buffers and filters. Taking such measures costs less in the long run than having to address problems after the creek has been degraded.

Kim Flom, Orland Park's assistant director of development services, said the village already is employing many such practices. Its police station has a water-permeable parking lot and native plants, designed to filter street salts and fluids from cars rather than have them run off and find their way into the creek. Officials also are considering a green roof on the village hall, she said.

Another project in the plan — restoring 1,300 feet of Marley Creek and enhancing its wetlands — is being considered near 179th Street, she said. The watershed plan further suggested measures there to reduce the frequent flooding on U.S. 6.

Businesses are being asked to do their part, too. The new Walmart in New Lenox isn't allowed to use chlorides in snow removal, and a run-off pond on the property is designed to break down and remove impurities before the water reaches Hickory Creek.

The creek doesn't boast a lot of recreational users, but anglers fish its waters at some sites, some folks canoe the waterway, and popular Will County forest preserve trails cross the creek at numerous places.

Mokena plans to adopt a resolution supporting the plan later this year.

Before adopting the plan, Frankfort officials will discuss it in detail "to make sure we can do it and make sure it makes sense for us," village administrator Jerry Ducay said.

With two sewage treatment plants dumping into Hickory Creek, "we are responsible for the creek," he said.

"Water is our future gold," village engineer Paul Pearson said. "If we don't protect it now, where will it be in 20 or 30 years?"

He admitted the plan may be a tough sell to the public and developers. Greener designs "will take time to get used to," he said.

That's why another key component to improving and sustaining the creek is to educate the public.

“True long-term improvement of Hickory Creek requires teaching youth to care about it and protect it,” the plan stated.

It also suggested starting a Friends of Hickory Creek group, collaborating with recreational groups, and connecting with scientific researchers and students.

“Everyone has a stake in this,” Sly said.