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Watershed protection plan nears completion



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Residents give their final input on the Silver Creek and Sleepy Hollow Creek Watershed Action Plan. (Lawrence Synett/Tribune)

A blueprint to protect watersheds in southeastern McHenry County is all but complete, culminating longtime planning efforts by environmental enthusiasts determined to protect the county's natural resources.

State, county and local agencies concerned over Fox River water quality began meeting late last year to gather resident feedback for definitive solutions to protect adjacent watersheds vital to cleaning up polluted waters. A watershed is an area of land from which water drains into a stream or creek.

That feedback has been used to create the Silver Creek and Sleepy Hollow Creek Watershed Action Plan, which after approval from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, can be used by local municipalities to protect water quality and improve watershed health.

"This is a voluntary plan that does not mandate any new community policies or ordinances," said Lynn Rotunno, watershed coordinator

for the Environmental Defenders of McHenry County, a citizen organization. “The hope is that communities will utilize it as a tool to help protect our rivers, streams, wetlands and groundwater resources.”

The IEPA previously found the area in southeastern McHenry County where the Silver Creek and Sleepy Hollow watersheds drain into the Fox River shows higher levels of E. coli bacteria and chloride, as well as fish with higher levels of mercury.

Home to more than 150 threatened and endangered species in the region, the Fox River basin is the major source of drinking water for communities in the southern portion of the county, which is solely dependent on groundwater for all of its public and private water supplies.

The problems stem from stormwater runoff, including road salt during the winter and nutrients from fertilizers, that are carried into the river, according to Cindy Skrukrud, clean water advocate for the Illinois Chapter of the Sierra Club. That causes inadequate amounts of dissolved oxygen, which causes the water to become murky, and shoreline eroding, leading to more and more soil reaching the water.

The Silver Creek and Sleepy Hollow Creek watersheds contain natural resources, wetlands and several lakes.

The 30-square-mile planning area that is home to more than 23,000 people includes Oakwood Hills and Prairie Grove, as well as portions of Crystal Lake, Bull Valley, Cary, McHenry, Nunda and Algonquin townships and unincorporated McHenry County.

The plan will serve as a guide, identifying projects and planning recommendations to help protect and improve water quality and watershed health.

Each year, the IEPA offers a grant program, with preference given to those who are implementing project born in or residing in a watershed plan, according to Tim Loftus, principle planner from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

“Projects in plans like this are the most eligible for money,” he said.

Once approved, the newly formed Silver Creek and Sleepy Hollow Creek Watershed Coalition will work to support plan implementation and continue planning efforts.

“This plan isn’t something that is set in stone,” Rotunno said. “It will grow and change as new information becomes available. Knowledge is a very important tool, and all of us want to protect our waters, but may not know how to do it. This is that tool.”

The final draft of the plan will be completed by the end of the year, at which time it will go to the IEPA for approval.

Planning partners for the project include EDMC, Fox River Ecosystem Partnership and Fox River Study Group. An IEPA grant is funding the project, and CMAP is helping oversee it.