

McHenry County officials look for ways to use Fox River

Studies with Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning guide officials

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By CAITLIN SWIECA - cswieca@shawmedia.com

ALGONQUIN – When the village undertook a [downtown planning study](#) a few years ago, suggestions on how to boost the area’s economy led officials to take a closer look at the natural landmark on the eastern edge of the study zone: the Fox River.

The authors of that study, which was done in conjunction with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning and finished in 2013, saw the river as an asset that could bring foot traffic into downtown Algonquin while providing recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Today, Algonquin and several other municipal agencies are working with CMAP planners to refocus their efforts on improving the Fox River throughout McHenry County.

Through CMAP’s Local Technical Assistance Program, Algonquin and [Carpentersville](#) recently completed a joint [Fox River Corridor Plan](#) that provided suggestions to improve the 5-mile stretch of the river between those villages.

Inspired by that, the McHenry County Department of Planning and Development successfully applied to the LTA program with a proposal to extend that study north.

While planners are collaborating with leaders of government organizations and community groups to improve the river, CMAP Associate Planner Brian Daly said the more than 600 people participating in the first study showed McHenry County residents already are passionate about that goal.

“For this project, it was [clear] that people care deeply about their river, and it has such a strong connection to the identity of their communities,” said Daly, who is a leader of both river studies. “Even people who aren’t using it recreationally think of it as such a big part of where they’re from.”

In the Algonquin-Carpentersville plan, CMAP’s suggestions ranged from the simple, such as adding public boat slips near downtown and entry points for novice canoe and kayak users, to the unconventional, such as building an overlook to the east side of the river near Algonquin Road.

The key to the study, however, was connectivity, Algonquin Trustee Jim Steigert said. Several tracts of land in the planning zone are owned by the McHenry County Conservation District and the Forest Preserve District of Kane County.

“It was a perfect mixture of interested parties,” Steigert said. “This is not an isolated problem. If you’re trying to promote connectivity, we need to bring these communities together.”

While the exact area for the McHenry County study has not been determined, it could include municipalities such as [McHenry](#) and [Fox River Grove](#) and areas owned by the Lake County Forest Preserves District and Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

“These communities have the river in common, and at least I’m not familiar with a common effort in the past to help plan for the river,” McHenry County Planning and Development Deputy Director Darrell Moore said. “Each one sees the river just as it flows through their area, maybe not as part of a greater regional aspect.”

Daly said the renewed focus on the Fox River follows a regional trend of viewing bodies of water as both natural resources and attractions.

CMAP Local Planning Director Jason Navota said CMAP regularly works on planning for the broader Mississippi River watershed, but these projects allow an opportunity to zone in on more specific areas.

“It’s definitely helpful that there are adjoining projects or overlapping projects that can complement and strengthen what we’re trying to do,” Navota said.

One goal that will require collaboration is improving the water quality of the Fox River, which Steigert cited as a top goal from the study.

“There’s very little one local government or even a county government can do when it comes to changing water quality all on their own,” Daly said, “but there are existing coalitions and groups in place, and these studies can be a good opportunity to incorporate some of their goals.”

In this case, CMAP planners likely will encourage local officials to be actively involved with the restoration goals of the [Fox River Study Group](#), he said.

Algonquin Senior Planner Ben Mason said officials will use the recently completed report as a guide when considering future improvements to the Fox River. Meanwhile, he said village officials would be happy to draw on their experience to help planners of the upcoming McHenry County study.

Daly, Navota and CMAP planning associate Kate Evasic will begin to collaborate with local officials on the McHenry County river plan soon, and the project likely will kick into high gear later this year.

The northern part of the Fox River has different characteristics from the portion studied earlier, most notably a higher prevalence of boats. Planners will take that into account as they zone in on a new portion of the river.

“That’s all part of the process that we go through with local partners – to examine what the conditions are in the study area,” Navota said. “That’s all part of the fun.”