



News

Galien Watershed protection focus of public mapping workshop

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By David Johnson

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News Editor

NEW TROY — Nearly 20 people got to to put their “two cents” in on which portions of the Galien River Watershed deserve protection during a July 27 public input meeting at the New Troy Community Center.

“We really want to focus tonight on natural areas and what’s special about the Galien,” said Marcy Colcough, senior planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission (SWMPC). “We have a lot of information from inventories and from different scientists, but it’s always important to get public input.”

The workshop centered around multi-layered maps containing what Colcough called “the best data that we have” on various natural features. The layer pertaining to natural areas was color-coded based on data gathered over the years, with those shaded in red being the most environmentally rich according to experts, and lesser levels indicated by different colors.



Peg Kohring, Debbie Rieth and Elizabeth Palulis (from left) examine a map showing the natural features of the Galien River Watershed during the July 27 public input workshop at the New Troy Community Center. - photo by David Johnson

“That was a model that was done by the Michigan Natural Features Inventory, a statewide organization that keeps track of all our threatened and endangered species and special communities,” Colcough explained. “They took different factors, they looked at all the natural lands that were still intact, and they scored them based on how big they were, how connected they are, if there’s water present they get a higher score, what the surrounding land use is ... and also the biorarity scores – looking if there are any endangered or threatened species present or thought to be present. So they would give a score to all these factors, apply it to all these lands, and that’s how they came up with that ranking.”

Other map layers highlighted land-use patterns, wetland and lost wetland areas, different types of farmland, and the different functions of wetlands such as surface water detention and sediment retention.

“What we do is take that information and through workshops like these get input from the public ... the people who live here locally,” she said. “Maybe there’s something that you know about that’s not on these maps.”

A translucent layer on top of all the maps allowed participants to use colored pencils for selecting natural areas (in blue) and farmland (purple) they would like to see conserved within the 82,200-acre portion of the watershed that is located in Berrien County.

Colcough said the plan is to combine the “best available science” and what’s important to local residents to create a final map. She said the final map (which will continue to be refined as new data becomes availavle) will be distributed to elected officials and local municipalities to aid in land-use planning.

“It will become kind of a tool we can use in planning,” she said. “And it will also can become a tool for landowners themselves to be more knowledgeable about what’s around you, in your watershed and in your community.”

Among the areas that participants in the July 27 workshop selected as "Opportunities for Preservation Efforts" were large swaths of the Galien River's main route from the New Troy area to New Buffalo — an area rich with red shadings on the underlying map. Some of the other areas marked in blue on the three maps meeting-goers worked on followed various waterways in the area or shadowed already protected portions of the watershed.

Friends of New Troy President Terry Hanover reported that a landowner has given permission to build a boardwalk on a wetland easement to connect land at the Community Center to Weesaw Township's river-front park at the old camel-back bridge — an area adjacent to the main branch of the Galien River chosen for protection by many in attendance (for more on conservation-related activities at the Community Center, see the article that appears the Features section of this website).

Colclough was assisted by SWMPC staffer Kris Martin and Environmental Planning Department intern Wesley Rieth.

Martin, a native of Buchanan and a recent Michigan State University graduate, said he interned for the organization two years ago during a watershed survey. He is now employed full-time as a program assistant working on environmental, transportation and watershed projects by providing outreach and education.

Rieth, a 2009 River Valley High School grad who is studying Political Science and Environmental Studies at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, said his internship involves water-quality issues.

"I'm exclusively working in the Galien River Watershed," he said. "I know the area very well, growing up in it and being involved in agriculture."

Also helping out were Peg Kohring and Laurie Lindquist of The Conservation Fund.

Colclough explained that the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission is the regional planning agency for Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties.

"We're involved in all kinds of planning in the three counties. We do transportation planning, economic development, natural resource planning, watershed planning," she said.

The July 27 public input meeting was part of a Galien River Watershed Project Colclough said is funded by a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency through the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

"The Galien River Watershed has been very successful in getting grants for several years now and doing a lot of good work in terms of improving water quality, doing education and outreach to municipalities and the public, and protecting land along the Galien River and other tributaries to try to maintain the water quality," she said.

Colclough said the concept of "green infrastructure" — that natural areas are crucial to the health of human health and the economy — is gaining credence. She said natural features that could be described as green infrastructure include rivers, creeks lakes, wetlands, riparian areas along bodies of water, forests, prairies, sand dunes, recreational and protected lands, and prime farmland.

"Wetlands are very important for mitigating flooding after large rains," she said. "These natural areas are very important for cleansing our water and filtering out pollutants before it reaches the river and flows into Lake Michigan to our beaches."

According to the SWMPC Web site, the Michigan portion of the Galien River Watershed (there also is an Indiana portion comprising about one third of the total) contains 62 percent rural land, 23 percent forest land, and 5 percent urban land, with the remainder being streams and lakes. The Galien River Watershed encompasses areas of prime farmland, Warren Woods Preserve, and a portion of the City of New Buffalo where the Galien River flows into Lake Michigan.

Kohring gave an overview of the watershed via a series of slides, starting at the Galien River Marsh near New Buffalo where she noted that Chikaming Open Lands, Berrien County and the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy all have landholdings.

She explained that the marsh is called a drowned river marsh because the water current at times reverses its flow and goes upstream.

Kohring said a feature of the watershed that has been completely lost is the coastal strand marshes ("short, grassy areas") that used to be found near Sawyer.

Kohring said the Galien River Watershed was almost entirely made up of beech-maple forest in the 1800s.

"And since we are in Weesaw Township I have to put the quote in — 'Originally Weesaw Township was heavily wooded, timbered with beech, whitewood and black walnut. The township was delayed many years in its settlement because of this fact.'"

Kohring said huge coniferous forests of tamarack and spruce were located between Three Oaks and Galien in the Avery Road area.

Maps showing current conditions indicate that much of the once forested area in the watershed is now farmland.

Kohring said Dayton Lake on the eastern edge of the watershed was created by glaciers and features unique native plants such as the water willow. She noted that the protected Mud Lake Bog near Buchanan is home to insect-eating sundew and pitcher plants.

In the mid-1800s, Kohring said a massive cranberry bog was located between Three Oaks and Galien. Another of the maps used during the public input meeting illustrated what Kohring described as "massive wetland draining" within the watershed. Additional map layers depicted the functional abilities of the original and current wetlands.

Colclough later said about 50 percent of the watershed's wetlands have been lost, with higher levels of some functions no longer in place.

Kohring said Native Americans created oak savannas in the New Buffalo area and around Dayton Lake by burning off the underbrush.

"If you look around Dayton Lake while driving along U.S. 12 you can see some of those glorious oak trees that are still left there that are remnants of the Native American burning.

Colclough listed some suggestions for landowners to aid the watershed's health, including creating grass or forested buffer zones along creeks and rivers, developing management plans for forests and farm land, restoring lost wetland areas or maintaining existing ones, and establishing a conservation easement through Chikaming Open Lands.

Kohring said landowners can protect portions of their property from development through such easements while continuing to still own the land.

"We are actively working with landowners in the Galien River Watershed right now under the same grant that is bringing you this wonderful event tonight," she said.

Some easements allow some development, while others are done as straight-up donations like the Kesling Preserve in Three Oaks Township. She said Chikaming Open Lands currently has 22 conservation easements and six preserves.

"There are great tax advantages this year until December 31st for donating conservation easements," she added.

For more information on the Galien River Watershed, visit www.swmpc.org/grw.asp. For more on Chikaming Open lands, go to www.chikamingopenlands.org.