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TOP STORY

Clearwater revival

Plans call for cleaning up Ox Creek and revitalizing Pipestone corridor

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Sep 9, 2018



Marcy Hamilton, with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, talks about the quality of the Yore Stoeffler Drain next to Home Depot in Benton Township. The planning commission and the Berrien County drain commissioner are working on a plan to clean up the drain and Ox Creek that they hope will also revitalize the Orchards Mall and Pipestone commercial corridor.

Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

BENTON TOWNSHIP — It's the dirtiest creek in Southwest Michigan, and one of the dirtiest in Michigan, meandering through an ocean of concrete and asphalt around Pipestone Road that allows rain water and pollutants to pour into the tributary.

It's Ox Creek, which flows through Benton Township and Benton Harbor until it reaches the Paw Paw River, which runs into the St. Joseph River and Lake Michigan.

When Ox Creek is flowing fast from storm run-off, it only takes two hours for contaminants to reach the lake and beaches, according to Christopher Quattrin, Berrien County's drain commissioner.

Quattrin's office and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission have embarked on a \$1.2 million project that they hope will be the first phase toward cleaning up Ox Creek and the adjacent Yore-Stoeffler drain, while transforming the commercial zone into a more attractive and environmentally friendly location.

Their goal in handling storm water is "slow it down, spread it out, soak it in."

They hope to tie in their plans with the scheduled revamping of the I-94 ramps by the Michigan Department of Transportation in 2020. Plans include building a non-motorized trail along a former railroad bed that connects to the Benton Harbor Arts District to the north.

"It's the gateway to our community, and we want it to look clean and beautiful and inviting," said Marcy Hamilton, with the planning commission, of the area that includes Orchards Mall.

The drain commission has been awarded a \$743,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, pending the final contract with the state agency. When approved, the grant will be coupled with \$528,000 in local matching funds for the project.

Receiving the grant could depend on gaining a resolution of support from the Board of Commissioners, which Quattrin has requested. That is expected to be discussed at the next Board of Commissioners meeting.

At last Thursday's Board of Commissioners' meeting, Administrator Bill Wolf said he didn't know why the drain commissioner was seeking support at the last minute on a grant that was submitted last year.

The concern is that, if the project didn't come fruition, a statement of support could make the county liable for the local matching funds. James McGovern, the county's attorney, said any resolution should make it clear that the local funding would come from the drainage district.

Wolf said he wasn't for or against the project. "I just want to protect the county."

Asphalt acres

“The Orchards Mall area is the largest retail district in Southwest Michigan,” the grant application to the DEQ pointed out. “However, it suffers from a dead mall and limited investment.”

The creek clean-up provides “an opportunity to leverage these improvements to attract new private investment to the Orchards Mall Retail District” with residential, retail and commercial uses, the document proposed.

While other projects have focused on reducing run-off from farms, this is the first major urban-focused effort within the Paw Paw River Watershed.

Work will include construction of rain gardens and other structures designed to slow down the flow of water into the creek, and filter out pollutants and debris. The owner of the Brookfield Dodge auto dealership on Pipestone Road has agreed to install four rain gardens and a bio-retention area in its parking lot to help in this effort.

The big target is the expanse of pavement around the Orchards Mall. Studies by the MEDQ determined that run-off from the mall area is hurting Ox Creek. The creek itself is on the agency’s list of bodies that do not meet clean water standards and that do not sustain aquatic life.

The huge parking lot around the mall provides no filtering of water, allowing water to carry contaminants directly into Ox Creek, Hamilton said. The flow contributes to “flashing,” in which rushing water causes erosion and dumps sediment into the waterway, making it unlivable for aquatic life.

It wasn’t always like this. Quattrin said he remembers swimming and fishing in the creek as a kid.

When he accompanied a state environmentalist on a visit to Ox Creek last year, he jokingly suggested “Hey, let’s get our bathing suits on and jump in!”

“He said ‘No way,’” Quattrin said.

Another woman who participated in meetings also remembered swimming in the creek, and said she hoped that some day her grandchildren could enjoy it.

One of their goals is to get the creek off the DEQ’s bad list by making it suitable for people and fish again.

“Let’s make it what it could be,” Quattrin envisioned.

The Ox Creek watershed covers 8,600 acres, encompassing 13 square miles. It includes 403 acres of wetlands, but almost three-quarters of its wetlands have been lost.

The project has the potential to restore 1,060 acres of wetlands, according to a website dedicated to Ox Creek. Wetlands are another source of filtration for run-off, while providing wildlife habitat.

By treating 30 acres of storm run-off area, officials believe they can reduce sediment flowing in the creek by 48,000 pounds each year, along with 345 pounds of nitrogen and 87 pounds of phosphorus.

Related work

The Yore-Stoeffler drain also needs extensive clean-up. Quattrin has been told that oil barrels and refrigerators have been dumped into ditches along the drain. Back-ups frequently flood the parking lot at Lakeland Health's Meadowbrook Road facility.

The drain office's match of \$528,000 will be used for the drain repair, Quattrin said. The DEQ grant will be applied to other projects along the corridor.

The Brookfield Dodge project is estimated to cost \$250,000, with half from grant funds and half from a local match. The business plans to remove 8,000 square feet of pavement to install four 2,000 square-foot rain gardens and a 14,200 square-foot infiltration basin.

Improvements eyed for the Orchards Mall property include removing 46,600 square feet of pavement and installing swales, or shallow ditches for capturing run-off, along with 35,400 square feet for dry detention. That work has an estimated cost of \$750,000.

The planners looked at the area affecting the watershed and realized that there was potential for affecting the entire commercial zone as well as Ox Creek.

Reasons for hope

It took about three years of discussions and meetings to bring on board partners, including Cornerstone Alliance, Benton Township, the Two Rivers Coalition and the Berrien Conservation District.

Wightman & Associates will handle the engineering for the planned improvements. The firm built rain gardens on its own property along Pipestone Road.

In the end, everyone is in favor of clean water, Hamilton said. “Nobody can say, I want dirty water.”

Quattrin is confident that aquatic life will return once the creek is cleaned up. A project with the Lighthouse drain in New Buffalo, with a stream inside a culvert, brought back fish.

An environmentalist told Quattrin “once you clean it, they will come back.”

The grant application was submitted in October of last year, and the award was announced in July.

“We were kinda shocked,” Quattrin admitted.

The applicants were surprised to have been awarded the full amount requested. Hamilton said that almost never happens.

“They are very excited about this,” Quattrin said of the DEQ officials who reviewed the plans.

Information on the project is at www.sustainoxcreek.org.

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