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TOP STORY

Pumping life back into Pipestone

Environmental restoration tied to economic revitalization

By JOHN MATUSZAK - HP Staff Writer Sep 9, 2018

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Clean a creek, restore a commercial corridor.

Those are the ultimate goals of the project to revitalize both Ox Creek and the area along Pipestone Road, being undertaken with the leadership of the Berrien County drain office and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

Don Brookfield, owner of Brookfield Dodge, at 1845 Pipestone Road, is working on plans to add rain gardens and other amenities on his lot to better manage water flowing from his lot into the nearby creek.

Brookfield, whose dealership has been at the location for six years, said he was excited about the objectives of improving the natural environment and revamping the business zone.

“Who wouldn’t be in favor of that?” Brookfield said.

He said he would like to add more landscaping to the “huge amount of hardscape” around his showroom.

By being among the first to take this step, Brookfield said he hopes to encourage other business owners to make similar moves to make the area more attractive and prosperous.

Mall hopes

Marcy Hamilton, with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, said this is one of the most complex projects she has worked on, with numerous partners.

Their ideas for the Orchards Mall include a more open-air atmosphere, with a central promenade and a “Main Street” feel. They think this would create a more welcoming, relaxing environment, with pools and ponds, while reducing impervious surfaces for better water management.

Of course, the wild card is that the mall is privately owned, and is in the midst of possibly changing hands. Its current owner, who bought the property in 2014, put the mall up for auction earlier this year but did not receive the minimum bid. Reportedly, negotiations with a potential buyer are underway, but no information on a future sale is available.

The planners are hoping to work with whoever owns the mall down the road.

They also foresee a Pipestone Plaza Park around the Pipestone and Mall Drive area, with mixed use residential, retail and hospitality locations.

Rob Cleveland, president of Cornerstone Alliance, was among those who submitted letters supporting the county drain office’s application for a grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality for the project.

He said it is unique to have a plan that ties together environmental goals with economic development.

The plan can pump new economic life into the area, Cleveland said.

“Retail isn’t dead, it’s changing,” and these plans try to integrate those changes, he said.

Adding partners

Upcoming work by the Michigan Department of Transportation presents another opportunity for cooperation on improvements. Ox Creek has a tributary that runs under I-94 at this spot, which planners believe could be an ideal location for large filtration ponds for water headed to the creek. The ponds would resemble natural wetlands and could provide the backdrop for a park that could serve as a trailhead for the 3-mile path to downtown Benton Harbor.

They also see room for development in unused scrubland behind Lowes and Wal-Mart and next to the burgeoning hotel district along Cinema Drive.

“The challenges of this location are clear, but what if we could turn it into a high-quality, connected development that provides commercial, mixed use, and residential purchase and lease opportunities?” along with stormwater management methods, a website dedicated to Ox Creek asks.

Christopher Quattrin, the Berrien County drain commissioner, and Hamilton have met with the managers of Home Depot, Meijer and Celebration Cinema about future phases of the project that they could be involved in. Quattrin also is working with the new motels to create a tiered pond system that will slow the flow of water to Ox Creek.

Other area businesses have shown a willingness to become better stewards of the environment. Quattrin said the area Burger King restaurant installed gardens and other amenities that not only manage storm water, but beautified the property, as well.

The planners expect that completion of the first phase of the project will take at least two years to complete. At least four meetings of the Ox Creek Restoration Partnership will be held during that period.

Planners will work with Benton Township officials to incorporate the Orchards Mall retail district into its master plan update and to develop new parking standards.

“The momentum is there, but it’s not complete,” Quattrin said.

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