Big River

Reggie McLeod

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La Crosse Marsh, Dividing a City

By David Syring

Even the map in the phone book divides La Crosse, Wisconsin, into a north and a south, with separate pages for each half. Held in check on the east by bluffs and on the west by the Mississippi, La Crosse has always been divided in two by the La Crosse River Marsh. The question of whether another road should be built across the marsh to connect the two parts of the city has also long divided its people on complex economic, social and environmental issues.

"This community has been grappling with this for over 30 years," says city planner, Larry Kirch. "The marsh has many values for the city and the region. We have to take a holistic approach to the community's needs."

On a street map or from a car driving on one of three existing roads that either cross or skirt it, the marsh looks like a gap — a piece of ground empty except for power lines, trees, ponds and expanses of grasses. When you get down into the marsh, however, you hear the calls of numerous birds, find many people biking and hiking its paths and realize the marsh is a heavily used and richly wild environment right in the heart of the city.

And, of course, all wetlands serve as water reservoirs and filters. Much of it was flooded in 1993.

"This marsh is the highest quality urban wetland in the state," says Chuck Lee, a key organizer of the La Crosse Marsh Coalition and a University of Wisconsin-La Crosse history professor.

The Coalition formed in 1988 after Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson reopened the question of the marsh's future by signing an agreement with the La Crosse County Board chairman, secretaries of the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and then-mayor, Patrick Zielke. They arranged for a two-year study to develop a long-term, land-use plan for the La Crosse River Valley.

"His [Thompson's] goal was to push along the idea of a highway through the marsh," says Lee.

(Marsh continued on page 2)
Studies and Plans

That two-year study turned into nine years of discussion resulting in Land Use Plan 6. The plan, approved by elected officials, planners and environmentalists alike, is currently under consideration by the state DNR office in Madison. Land Use Plan 6 offers marsh advocates hope, since about 1,100 acres of wetland would receive protection by the state DNR. The extent of that protection remains unclear.

“We wanted wildlife area protection, but being the only large intact urban marsh within the state causes problems for such designation,” says Lee. “For example, hunting is usually allowed in wildlife areas, but being inside the city makes that a problem. It would have been a wildlife area with an asterisk and that’s the obstacle. I think some people at the state DNR’s office are opposed to such special designations.”

Plan 6 defines land-use policy for recreation, natural resources and economic development, but does not resolve the question of a road through the marsh. Deciding where and how to build a new north-south road awaits the final draft of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) being prepared by Milwaukee-based HNTB Corporation.

“The EIS follows the spirit and intent of Land Use Plan 6,” city planner Kirch says, adding that transportation is often the key to a community’s success.

“La Crosse was built here to take advantage of the Mississippi River as a transportation route. It’s what made the city thrive,” Kirch says. “Transportation and communication are the hubs of a community’s vitality.”

According to Kirch, economic activity has shifted north from downtown to the Interstate 90 corridor, though the city remains a center for education (a university and two colleges), health care (two major medical centers) and jobs (46,000).

“I-90 is the new Mississippi in this area,” he says. “It’s the new transportation route and La Crosse needs to stay connected to that corridor to stay successful as a community. If it is determined that a new road is needed, then the EIS outlines a new corridor from I-90 to South Avenue and measures its social, environmental and economic impacts. We have a beautiful environment here, and we have to plan how to meet the future needs of the community without killing the golden goose.”

The draft EIS identifies four possible routes for a road through the marsh. The proposed routes would eliminate from 44 to 56 housing units and 15 to 23 businesses, and would cost between $52.7 million and $67.1 million. Eliminating housing units and businesses might reduce taxable property, potentially reducing the city’s tax revenues. Each proposed route would affect habitat for several species of animals on the state threatened list, including the great egret, speckled chub, river redhorse and blue sucker. They would also eliminate the only known habitat in the area for the state-listed, Bell’s Vireo, though the plan sets aside nearby agricultural land for new vireo habitat.

Newly-elected La Crosse mayor, John Medinger, inherits a number of social and economic problems from previous city leaders, including a growing poverty rate (21 percent) and the flight of upper- and middle-class families from the city to surrounding areas. Though a new road remains a possibility, Medinger says he does not support any of the plans proposed by the draft EIS, but adds that he has asked DOT engineers to look at an alternate, minimal encroachment plan he drew up himself.

“I’m still leaving the door open for a future north-south corridor to begin in 2010,” says Medinger. “I don’t want all the development and prosperity to move north to Interstate 90. I don’t want the city of La Crosse to die. Nobody knows what impact this road would have. To me, it’s a social experiment. It has the ability to save La Crosse or to kill La Crosse. I don’t know the answer.”

Opposition

Dan Herber, city council member from 1993 to 1997, worked extensively on Land Use Plan 6, and still strongly criticizes a new road.

“Proposals for a marsh road have always failed. Sometimes they fail because of high costs, sometimes they’re defeated by active resistance,” Herber says. “Throughout the process, the DOT has never asked, ‘Do you want a road?’ but always, ‘Do you want this road or that road?’”

“I’d like to know whether any aspects of the community are off-limits for the building of a road. Are any neighborhoods or parts of the marsh ever off limits?” Herber asks.

“Every plan that comes up has generated new groups in opposition,” Lee observes. “Simply no consensus has been built about whether a road is needed or where it should go.”

The most recent round of proposals led to the formation of Liveable Neighborhoods, a group of La Crosse residents dedicated to raising public awareness about the impact any new road would have on neighborhoods.

“We had huge turnouts at our first meetings about the north-south corridor,” says Chris Kahlow, one of three women who founded the group.
“And we continue to have good turnouts. We made it clear from the beginning that we’re not willing to sacrifice any neighborhoods, including the marsh.”

Liveable Neighborhoods might push for a referendum should a projected road be approved. The group believes local taxpayers will not support $20 million or more in local costs, especially if it meant destroying neighborhoods. Mayor Medinger says he would stand by the outcome of such a referendum, though he’s not confident the city’s voters would be against a road.

La Crosse Chamber of Commerce head, Tim Tracey, says the bottom line for building a new road is safety. He says a new road would reduce accident rates, which are higher than state averages on two of La Crosse’s existing north-south roads (Highways 35 and 53). Accident rates on the other existing road, Highway 16, are lower than average.

Tracey says a new road would strengthen La Crosse’s economy. He cites a DOT statistic that says 86% of new manufacturing jobs in Wisconsin created over the last five years were located within five miles of a major transportation route.

“The real fear is that if it becomes too cumbersome for people to get around an area, you can lose employees,” says Tracey.

Lee argues that a new road would not solve La Crosse’s problems, and would largely detract from the city’s distinctive character.

“We know where we are going if we simply try to build more roads — you never keep up,” Lee says. “I am not anti-car, but I think any city has an obligation to live in concert with its surroundings.”

Lee argues the ultimate fate of some mitigation land remains hazy. A Shelby soccer group recently got approval for a new athletic field north of Gillette Street that includes some wetland set aside when an industrial park was built years ago. This created an awkward situation for people who think that mitigation land should remain wetlands.

“The Marsh Coalition was put into the position of going in front of the city council and arguing against soccer moms,” Lee says. “We lost that one, and we’ll lose those every time. We’re certainly not against the idea of soccer fields as compared to industrial parks, but it raises the issue of what mitigation land is supposed to be.”

On a mid-May morning, 200 Logan Middle School eighth graders spread out through the marsh. They’re here to hone their algebra and geometry skills by measuring water depth, flow volumes and turbidity. According to first-year math and history teacher, Mathew Christen, Logan teachers bring students here each year to connect lessons learned in school with the world away from the classroom.

“I don’t see how you can live in Wisconsin or Minnesota and not try to understand wetlands,” Christen says.

Understanding basic science and math seem simple compared to making sense of La Crosse’s marsh debate. Will another nine years of political wrangling be needed to sort out land-use plans for the marsh? Will these eighth-graders drive to work in 2010 over the spot where they first learned about wetlands?

David Syring is associate editor of Big River.

**Big River**

Big River (ISSN 1070-8340) is published monthly by Big River, 701 E East Fourth Street, Suite 203, Winona, MN 55987; (507) 454-5949; fax: (507) 454-2133; email: bigriver@aol.com; web site: <http://www.big-river.com>

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Subscriptions are $28 for one year, $50 for two years or $2.75 per single issue. Send subscriptions, single copy orders and change-of-address requests to Big River, PO Box 741, Winona, MN 55987.

Second-class postage paid at Winona, MN.

POSTMASTER: send change-of-address requests to Big River, PO Box 741, Winona, MN 55987.

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June 1997
miles southeast of the bridge across
the river at Winona. The spot isn’t
well marked, but railroad tracks cross
the highway near the entrance.

The trail begins on a gravel service
road that heads through the refuge.
It’s a rough ride for narrow bike tires,
especially when they’ve dumped on a
fresh load of gravel, but the refuge is
a great place for spotting wildlife and
worth a little bone rattling. I’ve spot­
ted coyotes, skunks, deer, fox, various
snakes and a softshell turtle on the
refuge road.

The road passes an observation
deck built over a huge wetland often
busy with swans, pelicans, herons,
egrets, ducks and other water birds.

After passing through the refuge,
the trail follows an old railroad grade
surfaced with finely crushed lime­
stone. Walkers, joggers and skiers also
use the trail, but most trail users are
pedalling. The trail skirts wetlands on
the right and small forest strips on the
left.

In the spring this is one of the few
places in the region where you will
find lupines blooming. As with many
railroad corridors, a variety of prairie
plants found refuge from the plow
and bulldozer on this narrow right of
way. You might also spot a snapping
turtle looking for a good spot to lay
its eggs. On a ride last fall, I kept
stopping to help newly hatched
and snapping turtles cross
the trail to reach the water. The hatch­
ings were exact replicas of their par­
ents, except that they were about the
size of a quarter.

Eventually the trail is enfolded by
forest and passes a junction that leads
into Perrot State Park. Take this loop
west through the park and you’ll fol­
low the Mississippi to and through
the village of Trempealeau, and eventu­
ally come back to the trail on the
other side of town.

If you stay on the trail you’ll cut
diagonally through town, between
backyards, past a lumber mill and the
swimming pool and back to a trail­s
ide parking lot with restrooms (no
water).

People often begin at this point of
the trail. South of Trempealeau, the
trail glides gently down into the Black
River delta, crossing 18 bridges over
creeks and channels heading for the
Mississippi. The bridges offer great
views of the backwaters, and they
make a cool sound when you ride
your bike over the diagonal planks
that have replaced steel rails and ties.

South of the Black River the area
around the trail opens up into patches
of prairie. Eventually a hill rises on
the left and drops off to the right.
Soon you catch glimpses of Lake On­
alaska, which is separated from the
Main Channel of the Mississippi by a
string of islands.

The trail appears to end in an alley
downtown Onalaska, above the
spillway for Lock and Dam 7. How­
ever, it continues, after a short gap,
across Onalaska and winds up near
the La Crosse River Trail. Soon the
trails will be linked, but in the mean­
time many bikers follow a path along
the railroad tracks to the next trail,
which is marked by a small park.

The La Crosse River Trail con­tinues
to Sparta, where the Sparta-Elroy
Trail goes to (you guessed it) Elroy,
where the Old 500 Trail continues to
Reedsburg. You could travel from the
Trempealeau Refuge to Reedsburg,
about 100 miles, almost entirely on
trails.

Adults need a trail pass to ride the
trails. Perrot State Park and many
area businesses sell them.

Bring plenty of water.

Reggie McLeod is editor of Big River.
Current Events

By Molly McGuire, Reggie McLeod and David Syring

River Research

Homer, Minn. — Closely watching changes in the Mississippi River sent a flood of awards and scholarships to Winona Senior High School senior Anne Jefferson. Jefferson's research on sedimentation in the Upper Mississippi most recently drew top prize at the International Science and Engineering Fair in Louisville, Kentucky. She's also won enough scholarship money to attend Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, Maryland, where she plans to major in environmental earth science. She plans to go to law school and a career in environmental law or public policy.

Jefferson lives near the river in Homer, Minn. Her research documents and analyzes sedimentation in Pool 6, located between Fountain City and Trempealeau, Wis. She found that sediments accumulate in the lower end of the pool much more rapidly than at the upper end. Her data show that wing dams, closing dams and Lock and Dam 6 have dramatically altered sedimentation and island formation, and that the resulting loss of habitat has led to a drop in the number of cormorant roosts and gull activity. She concludes, "The accumulation of sediment in the river has a tremendous effect on navigation and economic activity, recreation, and ecological viability."

To see abstracts of Jefferson's work, and the full text of her most recent scientific paper, visit her website: <http://www.luminet.net/~cjef-fers/anne/science>.

River Gets Dirtier

St. Peter, Minn. — The Minnesota River was already the most polluted river in the state, but from late April to mid May, a broken sewer pipe dumped a million gallons of raw sewage a day into it at St. Peter. City workers completed repairs to the flood-damaged pipe on May 16. According to city water/wastewater foreman, Pete Moulton, crews worked long days, completing the repairs in just a few weeks rather than the month or more originally predicted.

The spring flood washed away three feet of a large pipe connecting a lift station to the settling ponds. The pipe ran under the river and across the floodplain, making it difficult to locate the leak in high water. Following the 1993 flood, officials decided that the plant should be moved out of the floodplain, but the move, with a $12 million to $20 million price tag, awaits funding, according to the St. Paul Pioneer Press (5-1-97).

Grassroots Lobbying

A donation by Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) offers $70,000 in grants this year for grassroots groups lobbying for river conservation. The program offers grants ranging from $200 to $1,000 for project-specific lobbying expenses, such as printing, mailing, travel, phone calls and meetings. Grants cannot be used for general education, scientific research or water quality monitoring. The program will be administered by the National Rivers Coalition, a group of conservation organizations.

Lobbying activities for legislation in six areas will be considered for funding: river recreation; river protection; state river policies; hydropower reform; new strategies for river protection; and urban river restoration. Deadlines for proposals are August 20 and November 20.

For information, contact: National Rivers Coalition, c/o Chad Smith, American Rivers, 1025 Vermont Ave., NW, Suite 720, Washington, DC 20005; or call (202) 547-6900; or email chadsmith@amrivers.org.

Less Atrazine

Wisconsin — Atrazine contamination in Wisconsin groundwater appears to be improving, according the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP).

In 1989, the DATCP found atrazine in 12 percent of over 500 wells tested, prompting the state to adopt tighter rules for application of the herbicide, which is generally applied to corn fields. The rule, which went into effect in 1991, reduced the amount of atrazine farmers could use in Wisconsin to between .75 and 1.5 pounds per acre depending on soil type and previous use.

The result has been a 45-percent reduction of atrazine levels in contaminated wells, and a growing awareness among Wisconsin farmers of the importance of careful use of the chemical, according to the office of state senator Brian D. Rude (R-Coon Valley). A University of Wisconsin survey found over 98 percent of Wisconsin farmers complied with the rule.

Copies of the atrazine report can be requested from the Legislative Hotline at 1-800-362-9472.

New Conservation Funds

A proposed federal tax on certain outdoor products might become a key source of funds for wildlife conservation projects. The proposal, known as "Teamming with Wildlife," will probably be considered by Congress this session.

The bill would tax products, such as bird food, camping gear, binoculars, field guides, canoes and mountain bikes, to fund state conservation, outdoor recreation and conservation...
Exploding Pesticide

West Helena, Ark. — A May 8 explosion at a pesticide plant in West Helena, Ark., killed three people and spread toxic chemicals on BPX Inc., property near the Mississippi River. Overnight showers sent emergency crews scrambling to build a dirt-and-sand levee to keep contaminated water from reaching the river.

The explosion came while firefighters investigated a smoldering bag of the pesticide, azinphosmethyl. The blast killed three firefighters and sent up a 100-foot fireball. Officials evacuated people from homes near the plant for seven hours and distributed antidotes for chemical poisoning to firefighters and some local residents.

Weaver Bottoms Outlet

Weaver, Minn. — The Army Corps of Engineers plans to dredge a new outlet where Weaver Bottoms drains into the Mississippi in Pool 5. The outlet currently drains perpendicular to the Main Channel, causing a tricky outdraft for towboat pilots and increasing the potential for a spill-producing accident.

The plan calls for dredging about 40,000 cubic yards of material. The Corps will use some of the dredge material to reconstruct the outlet so that it enters nearly parallel to the Main Channel. The remaining fill will be barged to the Lost Island containment site.

According to the Corps, the project will increase water circulation through the bottoms by between 13 to 25 percent and could increase the quality of fish and wildlife habitat.

New Pipeline

Cottage Grove, Minn. — Construction of a proposed 30-inch natural gas pipeline just downriver from Lower Grey Cloud Island might make boating a little trickier this summer. ENRON/Northern Natural Gas Co. has applied to lay the pipe downriver from an existing 24-inch pipe.

The project would lay the new pipe a minimum of five feet under the river channel and, according to the Army Corps of Engineers, would not disrupt the navigation channel. The project calls for draining a bay isolated from the river by a railroad bed, to use as a base for boring equipment. Builders would weld the pipe together on a barge located south of the navigation channel, then lay it directly into an excavated trench to minimize interference with boat traffic.

Work on the pipeline would run from July 1 to September 23, with 13 work days required to lay the pipe.

A public comment period on the application runs until June 6. Comments should refer to permit application 97-03415-IP-RJA and can be addressed to: Regulatory Branch, St. Paul District, Corps of Engineers, 190 Fifth Street East, St. Paul, MN, 55101-1638; or call Ralph J. Augustin at (612) 290-5369.

Act Upheld

The House of Representatives deflected an attempt to weaken the Endangered Species Act when building flood-control devices. The bill, H.R. 478, known as the Herger/Pombo waiver, would have put aside endangered species protections during the construction of flood-control measures.

Instead of passing the bill as presented, the House approved a compromise amendment written by a moderate Republican, Sherwood Boehlert of New York. The amendment would only slightly expand the current policy of deferring the Endangered Species Act for emergency flood repairs. The bill's original sponsor, California Republican, Richard Pombo, pulled his version of H.R. 478 from the floor, and strongly criticized the Boehlert amendment.

Healthier Hawks

Cooperative efforts between biologists and government agencies in the United States and Argentina have halted the steep decline in the numbers of Swainson's hawks visiting breeding nests.
Ciba-Geigy, the chemical's manufacturer, grasshoppers in alfalfa fields. The hawks died — an estimated 20,000 in 1995-1996 alone — because they ate contaminated grasshoppers. Ciba-Geigy, the chemical’s manufacturer, said the pesticide is not registered for grasshoppers or alfalfa.

A partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Argentinian wildlife agencies, academic researchers and others, including Ciba-Geigy, conducted an intensive program to educate farmers and provide them with alternatives to monocrotophos. As a result, observers reported only 24 hawk deaths this winter.

Nuke Shut Down
Monticello, Minn. — The Monticello nuclear power plant, on the Mississippi about 45 miles upriver from Minneapolis, shut down on May 9 because of a design flaw in the screens that strain cooling water as it enters the plant’s backup water pumps. Northern States Power Co. (NSP) says the plant may be shut down for two to three months for the repairs. According to Mike Wadley, NSP’s vice president of nuclear generation, the shutdown should not lead to energy shortages for NSP customers.

Corn or Soybeans?
U.S. farmers appear to be planning larger corn crops this year rather than waiting the extra few weeks to plant soybeans. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates 81.4 million acres will be planted to corn this year, up 14 percent from the last few years. Soybean plantings are expected to reach 68.8 million acres, up seven percent from last year.

The USDA report came at the same time as a 27-percent jump in soybean futures, according to an Associated Press story. Futures trader Rich Albaugh of Commodity Services in Des Moines, Iowa, said the bottom line to farmers is that they can still earn as much planting corn as soybeans. Larger corn plantings may be an attempt to balance crop rotations in areas where difficult weather has required farmers to increase soybean plantings over the last two years.

Foot South American crops heightened demand for U.S. soybeans. Observers think international exports of Midwest corn and soybeans, much of which travels downriver on barges, might be delayed by the need for increased dredging near the mouth of the Mississippi in Louisiana (See Big River, May 1997).

Resources
A 12-page spring guide to Iowa fishing, hunting and wildlife is available from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Contact an Iowa conservation officer or write Editor, Iowa Fish and Wildlife News, at 900 E. Grand, Wallace State Office Bldg, Des Moines, Iowa 50319-0034.

The lawn care season is gearing up. Learn about water-healthy ways to manage your yard from the University of Wisconsin-Extension series on yard care and the environment. To order booklets on wise weed control, fertilizing, watering, natural shoreline landscaping and more, phone (608) 262-3346. A fact sheet on urban runoff with tips on how to reduce the pollutants and sediment that often accompany stormwater down the drains is also available.

The 1996/96 Nonpoint Source Directory is available from (317) 494-9555 for $2. Published by the Conservation Technology Information Center, the directory lists nonpoint source pollution contacts by state and region.

The Izaak Walton League of America has a new stream monitoring guide for science fairs or community stream projects. For the Science Project Guide for Students, send $3 to Stream Doctor Project, 707 Conservation Lane, Gaithersburg, MD 20878-2983.
Big River June 1997

Almanac

By Kenny Salvey

A week of touring the Pacific Northwest with my wife, Mary Kay, on our honeymoon, has enhanced our appreciation for the big river. Each valley, mountain, river and even the Pacific Ocean — while unique and wondrous — seemed to pale in comparison to “our big river country.”

June is such a verdant, lovely, peaceful time along the river. The air, sky and water seem to melt into a deep azure. Leaves, grasses and aquatic plants display so many shades of green. Flowers and birds in full plumage add brilliant color to this perfect landscape tapestry.

Clear, cool nights and bright, sunny days are June’s legacy. Insect hatches are abundant, some fish begin to feed on the surface. Catfish spawn along the rock rip rap. Towboats push extra barges, trying to make up for the spring flood. River kids throw their caps in the air, shout “Yippie, school is out!” and head for familiar swimming and fishing holes, sandbars and island campsites. Some places will have changed much, according to the river’s whim.

Mary Kay and I experienced many new and exciting natural phenomena during the past week. But none can rival our big river! Once river folk, always river folk, aye my friends? 

Meetings, Celebrations? Send us your special calendar events.

Mail to:
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