

The vision of the Friends of the Minnesota Valley

By Nelson French, Director, Friends of the Minnesota Valley

In the 1970's citizens concerned about increasing development in the Minnesota River Valley convinced county boards and city councils along the river corridor that the area could best be preserved as a national wildlife refuge. They held public meetings and spearheaded an extensive letter writing campaign, and in 1976 the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge was established by Congress. To provide ongoing support for the Refuge and to promote environmental education, the group formed the Friends of the Minnesota Valley in 1982.

We have since helped to secure more than \$22 million in federal funding for Refuge land acquisition and construction of the Refuge's Visitor Center; recently, we played a major role in achieving a \$25 million land acquisition and facility replacement fund from the Metropolitan Airports Commission.

The Friends also continue to advocate and promote awareness of the Refuge and the ecological importance of the Lower Minnesota River Watershed through environmental education, community involvement, fund-raising, monitoring legislation and issues that affect the valley, recruiting members and volunteers, and developing in the valley a

registry of private landowners who voluntarily commit to protecting and preserving their land.

Reaching out and activating the local communities is crucial to the maintenance and restoration of a healthy and sustainable river environment. To address this, the Friends have initiated a comprehensive public education campaign, Leadership in Stewardship, whose goals are to:

- Conserve biodiversity of the Lower Minnesota Valley.
- Instill within the community a sense of responsibility for the Lower Minnesota Valley.
- Develop a strong base of resources to sustain the Friends organization. ❖

To join the Friends For more information on how to join the Friends and become involved in efforts to improve the health of the Lower Minnesota River Watershed, please contact us by phone at 612-858-0737 or e-mail at fmv12@hotmail.com

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Monthly meetings, open to the public, are usually held on the 3rd Wednesday of each month. Phone the number above for confirmation; then come to:

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FIRST CLASS

LOWER MINNESOTA RIVER WATERSHED DISTRICT NEWS

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LOWER MINNESOTA RIVER WATERSHED DISTRICT NEWS

what you should know about your water resources

New water management plan will guide other districts too

By law, each of Minnesota's 41 watershed districts is required to have a water management plan — a document that explains the problems it faces in managing water resources and proposes methods for dealing with these problems.

Since its inception in 1960, the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District (LMRWD) has operated under such a plan. But this fall, after a two-year review by concerned citizens, local units of government, and government agencies, a newly revised plan was approved by the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and adopted by the District's Board of Managers. Without increasing the District's annual \$200,000 levy, this new plan will help the Board manage the water resources of the District for the next 10 years. It will also serve, for the next few years, as a guide for adjacent watershed districts, water management organizations, and local units of government as they update their own water management plans.

Like the District's previous plan, the new plan describes the history and background of the District; inventories land and water resources; assesses problems and issues facing the District; presents goals and policies; and outlines specific projects that will realize those goals.

The new plan also suggests broader, bolder roles for the District in the following areas: 1. Evaluating and assessing water quality. 2. Disseminating information to the public. 3. Taking commercial navigation initiatives. 4. Reviewing development projects and plans.

In its first role, evaluating water quality, the District will be funding projects with state and local units of government. (See story, p. 2, about water monitoring efforts that the District is helping to fund on Assumption and Eagle creeks.)

In its second role, the District will disseminate information on water resources more widely and aggressively throughout the District as a whole — continuing to publish this newsletter, posting it on the Web, and making new educational presentations at schools and other venues like the Minnesota River National Wildlife Refuge.

In its third role, the District will continue its efforts to acquire dredge material deposit sites needed by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers to keep the river channel open for navigation. The District will also participate in other projects that aid navigation, for example, funding bank erosion control experiments (see article on p. 3). Finally, the District is



Wildfowl at Blackdog Lake, on the Minnesota River floodplain. Photo: Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge.

strengthening its role in reviewing commercial and governmental development. As the District's attorney, Bruce Malkerson, explains, "Once the plan was approved by BWSR, it became a model for other watershed districts. That's because the District is asking each local unit of government whose water resources fall within its boundaries to enter into a joint resolution agreeing that it will adopt the BWSR-approved policies and standards of our district. If the units do so, and enforce the policies and standards, the LMRWD will no longer be reviewing and commenting on their development plans. If the units don't do so, the District will apply its rules to their development." ❖

Read this letter on the Web, phone for plan summary

You can now read this newsletter online and also learn about Minnesota's other watershed districts and water management organizations. Go to: http://www.mnwatershed.org

For a copy of the executive summary of the new water management plan, go to the above Web address — or phone Larry Samstad at 612-445-7993 or Karen Chandler at 612-823-2813.

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Left: The DNR's Kevin Bigalke checks out water monitoring equipment above Eagle Creek; similar equipment will soon be installed on Assumption Creek. Photo: Wallace Neal. Above: Chaska High School ecology class takes part in a water monitoring jaunt on Assumption Creek. Photo: Dan Ress.

Water monitoring efforts under way on Assumption and Eagle creeks

With the enthusiastic help of high school biology students, and funding from the District, the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is looking into the water of local creeks to see what it can see.

Biology teachers from Burnsville and Chaska high schools have taken their students to Eagle and Assumption creeks, respectively, to collect aquatic insects, whose health reflects that of the water they live in. Helped by funding from the District, the DNR and the Met Council are monitoring the chemical condition of the water in the streams.

This past year alone, Chaska High's Dan Ress has taken his students to Assumption Creek three times to collect specimens in conjunction with the DNR and its Metro Trout Stream Watershed Protection Initiative — a program designed to see just how trout-healthy our metro-area trout streams now are, and how healthy they can stay.

In the seven-county metro area, there are only fifteen trout streams left, and they're in the middle of rapidly growing suburbs. Like all trout streams, they require clear, cold water, with plenty of oxygen. These requirements make them susceptible to pollution from fertilizers and to stormwater runoff that clogs them with sediment and raises temperatures.

Kevin Bigalke, director of the Trout Stream Initiative, describes the water monitoring station in place at Eagle Creek (and to be installed at Assumption) as a two by three foot steel box that sits on the bank.

"Inside the box, an electronic data logger stores various devices: a pressure transducer to monitor the water level, another probe to measure dissolved oxygen, a temperature probe, a conductivity probe, and a tip bucket rain gauge." The probes lead through PVC conduit into the stream.

Meanwhile, Dan Ress's Chaska High School students are monitoring the health of aquatic animals — and thus the health of the stream. "The kids have done excellent work," Ress testifies, "looking for creatures and bringing them back to the lab for identification.

"The most crucial thing is the life in the stream. The creatures we look at and bring back are macroinvertebrates, including the larvae of mayflies, caddis

flies, and beetles, as well as snails and scuds, a scavenger related to crayfish. The DNR needs an idea of what's there, because these creatures indicate water quality."

If trout streams are not to disappear from our midst altogether, we need to be mindful of their special needs. This starts with just seeing them as they rush on beneath us and around us ... and recalling how we share our life with theirs, needing fresh water, nutrients, abundant air. ❖

Present boundaries of District best protect special natural resources

There has been discussion lately about expanding, contracting, or absorbing the District. Some government agencies or units would like to expand the LMRWD so that it also covers parts of other watershed districts, whose waters empty into the LMRWD. Some would like to restrict the District to the river itself, making it a special navigation district. Others would simply divide the District and absorb it in neighboring watershed districts.

The LMRWD is an odd animal, true. It's shaped differently — like a narrow line, over 32 miles long, that follows the course of the lower Minnesota River. And it works differently, too: rather than issuing permits for development, it monitors the issuing of permits by other agencies.

Most of the land on either side of the river is not subject to development. There's the Minnesota River National



With backhoe, workers install specially designed concrete-block sections on the south bank of the Minnesota River in Burnsville — one of nine different experimental erosion-control methods the District is testing. Photo: Pete Willenbring.

Wildlife Refuge, easily eroded river bluffs, and a large floodplain with floodplain lakes. There are rare metro-area trout streams, like Assumption and Eagle creeks, with special management issues. There's Boiling Springs, on Eagle Creek. There's the Savage Fen. In fact, only a small portion of the land in the district is likely ever to be developed.

Unlike other watershed districts, the LMRWD does not issue permits for commercial development. Rather, it monitors development, reviewing and commenting on significant private and public development projects. Local units of government within the District are required to submit plans to the District as part of their development process.

According to Board Manager Wallace Neal, "Because we're not preoccupied with regulating commercial development, we can concentrate on keeping intact the special natural resources within our boundaries. Our responsibilities transcend political boundaries. We look at the river valley as a whole and are charged with protecting all its natural resources."

Barr Engineering's Karen Chandler, who worked on the new water plan, explains: "If the District expanded, how big would it need to get? It's 64 square miles now, pretty close in size to other watershed districts in the metro area. This enables it to have a good handle on its responsibilities, without being gridlocked by huge size and too many diverse stakeholders.

"Splitting it among adjacent districts," Chandler says, "could jeopardize the crucial resource management work it has done for the whole lower Minnesota River valley. It's one of only a few that have a comprehensive resource management plan in place." ❖

District funds bank stabilization experiment

A project that the District is helping Dakota County fund may have long-term benefits for the river.

On a patch of NSP property on the Minnesota River, just east of the 35W bridge, an experimental project is evaluating the performance of nine different bank-stabilization treatments — including vegetation, concrete sections, polyester fabrics, and steel sheet piling.

Pete Willenbring, an engineer with WSB & Associates, which designed the project, explains that the project is "utilizing practical materials, some of which are less expensive to begin with and more likely to fail. But they're easy to use, and we'd like to see how they'll hold up over time. We also want to see if we can use lower-cost materials that can have applications elsewhere, as on other, smaller banks and streams."

While some of the installations require contractor and backhoe, others would be easy for do-it-yourself property owners to put in place. Only the future will tell how well the various treatments work and how long each holds up. Stay tuned for further word downstream. ❖



Glenda Spiotta, new manager from Scott County, took office this past spring. Photo: Wallace Neal.

Board president and v.p retire, new manager appointed

In spring 1999, President Jim A. Kephart and Vice President Eugene DePalma retired from the LMRWD Board of Managers and Glenda D. Spiotta joined the Board.

Kephart served on the board from 1988 to 1999 as Scott County's representative. He was president during the last two years of his term. In that time, he says, the board reviewed many drafts of the new water management plan (see cover story) and became, in a variety of ways, "a lot more proactive on a lot of policies." Kephart also worked on acquiring dredge material disposal sites for the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers.

DePalma left the board this June after three years as the Dakota County representative; during his tenure, he served first as assistant treasurer, then as vice president.

Spiotta joined the board in March, succeeding Kephart as the Scott County representative. Like Kephart a resident of Shakopee, she is serving a three-year term and looks forward to working with local communities on their water resource plans. ❖