Inside

Lorain County rediscovers the Black River

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Good words

People will miss that it once meant something to be Southern or Midwestern.
It doesn't mean much now, except for the climate.
Out on the Minnesota prairie, the little Swede towns are dying and the vast suburbs are booming, which are identical to the suburbs of Atlanta or Charlotte, where people live on Anonymous Drive in Homogeneous Hills, people who, when you meet them, the question "Where are you from?" doesn't lead to anything odd or interesting. They live somewhere near a Gap store, and what else do you want to know? —Garrison Keillor, from "The Future of Nostalgia," an essay in The New York Times Magazine

Reluctant or not, a metropolis is woven tightly together and cannot be easily unraveled. It is possible for us to escape or hide, but sooner or later our connections to the metropolis pull us back to it—and it to us....

Sooner or later, there is no place left to go.
—William Fulton, The Reluctant Metropolis

LAND AND WATER

Can a plan to manage water quality in Northeast Ohio also help control sprawl?

Where will sewers permit development in the Chagrin and other watersheds?

Wouldn't it be great if cities and towns in Northeast Ohio could agree on a rational development plan for the region?

Wouldn't it be even greater if that plan were based on environmental considerations like the impact of development on rivers and streams?

We have a chance to do just that with a new water quality management plan for the region. The question is whether the many communities of Northeast Ohio will overcome parochial, competitive pressures and cooperate on a long-term plan for the common good.

It will be a major test case for regional cooperation.
See pages 8-12
Transportation:

Transportation: A key way to keep up with transportation issues in the region is to get EconoCity Cleveland's free, twice-monthly bulletin, Getting Where We Want to Be. It's available by fax or e-mail. To be added to the distribution list, call at 216-932-3007 or send an e-mail message to econocity@jg.org.

—David Beach, Editor

EconoCity Cleveland O June 1997

Mission

EconoCity Cleveland is a nonprofit, tax-exempt, educational organization. Through the publication of the EconoCity Cleveland Journal and other programs, it will stimulate ecologically sound thinking about the Northeast Ohio region. EconoCity Cleveland Journal (formerly, an EconoCity Network among local groups working on urban and environmental issues) and promote ways to build stronger, livable, productive and stable communities.

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We should all be asking tough questions about the long-term, regional sustainability of these projects. Who will pay for the future maintenance of these new roads and interchanges? Who will pay for the congestion these new roads create elsewhere in the region? Who will pay the environmental costs from increased air and water pollution? Who will pay the tremendous costs of obligations—the costs of deferred investment on older communities in the region and tax base move outward?

Medina County isn't alone in efforts to undermine regional planning. Lorain County just set up a similar Transportation Improvement District. And Lake County recently came up with local funds to accelerate construction of an I-90 interchange at SR 615. Carried to the extreme, we will no sooner private development interests than their own highways and projects and interchanges. We've already heard talk of such offsets at I-90 and Lake-Naval Road, I-271 and Brimtools/Lander roads, and I-480 in Independence. It's time for the region to stand up and say that short-term development interests should not be allowed to distort our transportation system.

Transporation bulletin

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TRANSPORTATION

By Bradley Hamm

Medina County residents will go to the polls in November with the power to shape the transportation future of the region.

County officials have a best case scenario: they only need to approve a 1 4-cent sales tax to fund a new Transportation Improvement District (TID), which will mitigate $11 million in construction projects to be spent during the next 20 years on highway and interchange construction projects. The new road capacity would open up thousands of acres of open spaces and farmland to sprawl.

In February, county officials negotiated with the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) to create the Medina TID as the second such district in the state. The two parties agreed to split the financing of over a dozen future highway projects.

As originally proposed, the TID's first phase would include the widening of SR 18 from Winnfield Road to the Summit County line ($11.1 million in construction projects). The focus of the next three projects to build a bypass around the City of Medina ($30 million). And Phase III would involve four interchange construction and reconstruction projects and four highway widening projects ($75.6 million).

Several other projects have since been added to the laundry list. To make any of this happen, however, the TID's board—composed of the three County Commissioners, the County Engineer and an appointed number of county residents—must recommend the Economic Development Corporation—had to come up with a source of funding for the local share of project expenses. After considering several options, they recommended the sales tax increase.

To get voters to approve the tax initiative, the first and most important hurdle for the TID, and a lobbying group has already been created to campaign on its behalf. It’s not the only challenge. At least five of the proposed projects—two new interchanges on I-71 (at SR 162 and at Boston Road) and three modified interchanges (at SR 303, I-71/78 and SR 18)—will require the widening of I-71 before they can be built. Medina County has its share of the funds or not. This is because they will increase volume on the highway and degrade existing traffic flow. Since the interstate system was designed for long-distance interstate travel, interchanges meant primarily for local traffic are scrutinized carefully and often cannot be built without additional capacity through new lanes.

This adds urgency to a big project that ODOT has already proposed: the widening of I-71 in southwest Cuyahoga County and Medina County (from US 42 in Middleburg Heights to SR 18 in Medina Township). And this incidence was on the minds of Medina County Commissioners Stephen Hamblett and Patricia Gockerman when they voted on September 30 to create an I-71 Task Force to lobby for the additional lanes (see sidebar). If voters approve the sales tax increase, county residents will have to brace themselves for higher levels of residential and commercial development. By constraining highway capacity additions, the TID's efforts will intensify the county's explosive growth without providing incentives for more compact, environmentally-sound development. (Between 1970 and 1990, Medina County's population increased 48 percent, while the five-county NOACA region as a whole decreased 9 percent.) None of the proposed projects is intended to serve as a major highway, so the automobiles will remain the only realistic alternative for transportation within the region.

One project, a Southwest Parkway, may include a small amount of money for highway and walking paths. Residents in other parts of Northeast Ohio have reason to worry. Details of TID financing arrangements have not been finalized, but it appears that ODOT would reimburse its 5-cent share of expenses only after construction of a TID project is completed.

This means that, for project evaluation and making purposes, the TID projects will be funded entirely with local financing and may be exempt from some of the requirements faced by other highway capacity projects that receive state or federal funds. For example, NOACA, our regional transportation and environmental planning agency, may have no power to review the projects, regardless of their impact on the region's economy, growth patterns or air and water quality. And it's still uncertain whether the TID will have to conduct Major Investment Studies, which require serious consideration of alternatives to adding highway capacity.

For all these reasons, the TID could seriously undermine national transportation and land use planning at the regional level. For more information on the TID, contact the Medina County offices at 330-225-7100 or the Medina County Engineer at 330-722-9555. A citizens group opposed to the TID tax increase, known as CITRA, can be reached at 330-722-2799.

Pushing I-71 widening

In September, Medina County Commissioners Stephen Hamblett and Patricia Gockerman joined the Northeast Ohio Area Coordinating Agency (NOACA) Task Force to promote I-71's plan to widen I-71 between Middleburg Hills and SR 18. The resolution included that people questioning the widening project are using the I-71 case to scupper the region's new tax law on government secrecy.

But on the issue of I-71 widening, the resolution was made in the spirit of debate: the resolution was intended to create a platform to force discussion of the issue. The resolution was not intended to close off discussion, but rather to move the issue into the public arena where it will be fought out in the public's interest.
In the Black Action in the Black River watershed

Lorain County is turning more and more to the Black River. In the past few years, there has been an upswing of attention focused on the river—the natural feature that binds the county together.

Increasingly, the attention has been focused on land use impacts from residential development and agriculture—the biggest threats facing the Black. Since private landowners control 95 percent of the land along the river, activities are focusing on assisting landowners to maintain habitat and prevent the runoff of polluted stormwater.

The projects also are involving a diverse array of partners—environmental groups, local and county governments, health districts, soil and water conservation districts, state agencies such as Ohio EPA, local schools and colleges, watershed districts, farm groups and the building industry. The Black River Remedial Action Plan (RAP), a local committee working to restore the river, is helping to coordinate the efforts. Here are some updates on Black River activities.

- **Patch'ing streambanks**
  
  Loss of streambank (or "riparian") habitat adjacent to the Black River and its tributaries is one of the primary reasons for increasing sediment loads in the river. Vegetation along a stream filters out sediment and pollutants and provides habitat for a wide variety of wildlife.

  Several years ago the Lorain Soil and Water Conservation District used aerial photographs to estimate how much riparian habitat was being lost along the watershed. It found that 1,400 acres needed to be restored in a strip 33 feet wide on either side of the river. Ideally, these areas should be stabilized with trees and other permanent vegetation cover and allowed to revert to native conditions.

  During the past two years the Black River Stream Team has helped landowners employ "bioremidiation" techniques to stabilize several sections of eroding streambanks. Bioremidiation uses natural plant materials, such as willow plantings, to slow currents and anchor soil.

  These demonstration projects are working, so the stream team now hopes to stabilize longer stretches of riverbank. Possible candidates for restoration include an area upstream of the Lodi wastewater treatment plant in Medina County and several miles by the Indian Hollow Lake Golf Course.

  The stream team also plans a workshop to teach citizens simple methods of restoring streambanks.

  The stream team partners include the Black River RAP, Ohio EPA and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

- **Septic systems and farm runoff projects**
  
  The Lorain County environmental group, Seventh Generation, is working with the health districts and soil and water conservation districts in Lorain and Medina counties to reduce polluted runoff (also called nonpoint source pollution).

  The health districts will conduct field tests to determine where home septic systems are failing and then will develop inspection and maintenance programs to correct the problems. The soil and water districts will study how high-tech farming methods ("precision farming") to reduce the amount of tillage and chemical application can reduce farm runoff.

  These projects have been recommended for a $310,000 grant from U.S. EPA, which will be matched with in-kind contributions from the partners.

- **Soil conservation loans**
  
  Farm runoff is a major water quality problem in the Black River watershed.

  Prevention involves tillage methods that do not expose bare soil to rain and wind, as well as plantings that check erosion and buffer strips that filter stormwater.

  To promote the adoption of such practices, Ohio EPA has made about $12 million in low-interest loans available in the Black River watershed. Farmers can get low-interest loans to buy equipment for conservation tillage, revegetate erosion-prone areas, plant stream buffer strips and other projects. The funds are being administered by the soil and water conservation districts in the watershed.

- **Managing growth in townships**
  
  Sediment loading from agricultural practices and subsurface development is the biggest threat to the Black River today.

  Fortunately, most of this problem originates in townships that don't always have the resources or expertise to manage land use in ways that protect the environment.

  To provide more tools, the Lorain County Commissioners recently received a $71,000 grant from the Lake Erie Protection Fund to develop a model township comprehensive land use plan. The project will focus on Carlisle Twp. and will demonstrate planning and zoning practices that protect natural resources. It's intended to offer a model for other townships in the county.

  The project will develop a system of compatrified land use maps for Carlisle Twp. The maps will be in a format that can be easily updated, so planners will always have current information.

  In addition, a grant will fund workshops for township trustees and zoning officials. National experts in zoning and natural resource protection will be brought in to speak.

- **When it rains, it floods**
  
  Much of northern Lorain County, used to be a swamp forest—flat land with poorly drained soils. In recent years, a lot of this land has been cleared for agriculture and, increasingly, for development. The trees are gone, but the poor drainage remains.

  In fact, the drainage problems are much more serious because the natural, wet areas have been turned into roads, parking lots and rooftops. Stormwater has not gone into the natural vegetation systems. It runs off at high velocity and in high volumes—and it carries sediment and other pollutants.

  Thus, stormwater management is a big challenge for the future of Lorain County. It's also a challenge that's hard to address because the runoff problems are not discrete but are part of the overall watershed system. It's also a challenge that's hard to address because the runoff problems are not discrete but are part of the overall watershed system. It's also a challenge that's hard to address because the runoff problems are not discrete but are part of the overall watershed system.

  This local demonstration project is part of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which is funded by the Council of Great Lakes Governors. It is administered by The Conservation Fund, a national nonprofit group which conserves land and water by integrating economic and environmental goals.

  The Lorain County Community Alliance and the Black River RAP have been bringing in to work on this project, which is conservation development—channelling homes to preserve open space and natural resources. Instead of a subdivision with 100 homes on one-acre lots, for example, a developer can cluster the 100 units on quarter-acre lots and permanently preserve 75 acres as woods, fields or wetlands.

  To promote conservation development practices in Lorain County, the Black River RAP and other partners are working with local developers to design and build a conservation subdivision. The goal is to demonstrate ways to develop that will protect rather than degrade water resources nearby.

- **Sources of sediment**
  
  In 1996 Lorain County ranked ninth in Ohio with over 3,240 acres under development.

  The areas experiencing the most rapid development are in Avon, North Ridgeville, Avon Lake, the south side of Elyria, the west side of Lorain and Amherst and Carlisle Twp.

  Improvements have been added to the 184 major livestock operations in the watershed that is being monitored with a facility. It's estimated that 75 percent of the 15,000 rural septic systems in the Black River watershed are not functioning as designed. About one quarter of the 184 major livestock operators in the watershed have developed a nutrient management plan.

  As a result of bacterial pollution washing into Lake Erie after storms, the Lorain City Health Department posted swimming advisories on 22 days during the summer of 1996 at Lakeview Beach.

  Contaminated sediments in the harbor's river bottom where the sewage outfall is located have been an on-going problem. The Lorain City and State have been working to eliminate the problem but have had limited success.


- **Pollution problems fixed**
  
  In the past decade, a number of the Black River's major pollution hotspots have been eliminated, thanks to investments in municipal sewage treatment plants and cleanups at industrial sites:

  - The city of Elyria installed new equipment in its treatment plant in 1985.
  - Men (then Steadley) eliminated a major industrial discharge to the river in 1988.
  - In 1999 USS/Steel dredged sediments contaminated with coal tar. (Those were the infamous cancer-causing tars and deformities.)
  - The city of Lorain opened a new sewage treatment plant in 1988.

- **Remaining problems**
  
  Today pipe discharges are not the major source of water pollution in the Black. Significant industrial degradation comes from three sources:

  - Sediment volumes from basic soil that washes off farmland and construction sites.
  - Bacteria from human and animal wastes (from seven overflows, horse septic systems and livestock feedlots). It's estimated that 75 percent of the 15,000 rural septic systems in the Black River watershed are not functioning as designed. About one quarter of the 184 major livestock operations in the watershed have developed a nutrient management plan.
  - Sediment runoff from farmland accounts for about half of the watershed's pollution.

  These sediment sources are now the focus of the Black River RAP and other partners, who are working with local developers to design and build conservation subdivisions. The goal is to demonstrate ways to develop that will protect rather than degrade water resources nearby.

  This local demonstration project is part of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, which is funded by the Council of Great Lakes Governors. It is administered by The Conservation Fund, a national nonprofit group which conserves land and water by integrating economic and environmental goals.

- **Construction site runoff**
  
  If land must be developed, it's essential that builders employ the most effective erosion prevention practices to keep soil in place during construction. One runoff control can carry away tons of soil from an exposed construction site.

  The sediment then chokes adjacent streams.

  Seventh Generation, the Lorain County environmental group, recently received a $7,000 grant from the Great Lakes Commission to demonstrate best management practices for construction sites. Project partners are soil and water conservation districts and homeowners associations.

- **Addressing sprawl**
  
  Much of the development pressure in Lorain County is the result of Michigan's sprawl, which has led to increased urban development in neighboring counties.

  In the Black River watershed, the scope of suburban sprawl is such that the Black River is already considered a "nonpoint" source of pollution in local and state water quality plans. The problem is significant enough that the Lorain County Commissioners have filed a lawsuit against the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, which has been failing to address the problem.
County is the result of regional patterns of urban sprawl—people from Cuyahoga County moving farther out from the region’s urban core, as well as people moving out from Lorain County’s older cities.

In recent months, groups in the county have begun sponsoring a series of dialogs on sprawl and growth management issues. A forum on October 15, 1997, on “Smart Growth in Lorain County,” is being sponsored by the Lorain County Community Alliance, Lorain County Chamber of Commerce, Lorain County 2020, the Public Services Institute of Lorain County Community College and Oberlin College.

In addition, Seventh Generation has organized an Urban Sprawl Education Coalition to engage the community in discussions about the county’s land use future.

Watershed education project
How do you help young people develop a sense of place? How do you get them involved in local watershed activities?

The Black River Watershed Education Project aims to do both by translating watershed information into curricula and lesson plans for Lorain County schools. The project is a joint effort of Seventh Generation, the Oberlin College Environmental Studies Program and the Orion Society, a national organization that promotes environmental literacy and place-based nature education. The Orion Society selected Oberlin College as one of five sites in the country to pilot this watershed education pilot program.

During the 1996-97 school year, the project helped organize teacher-student projects at five schools. Elyria High School students cleaned up litter along the river. Sheffield Middle School students monitored water quality in French Creek, a major tributary to the Black River. Avon High School students worked with Oberlin College students to survey the plants in a local wetland. Eastern Heights Jr. High School students started a garden and learned about organic food production. And Oberlin High School students designed a model ecological house.

Recently, Seventh Generation hired an environmental education director, David Cornelioli, to coordinate the watershed education project, develop a teacher network, organize teacher training sessions, and build an environmental education resource library.

Black River contacts
- Friends of the Black River/Seventh Generation (440-322-4187)
- Russell Gibson, Northwest Ohio Scenic River Coordinator, Ohio Department of Natural Resources (419-981-6319)
- Linda Laguzat, Black River Remedial Action Plan coordinator, Ohio EPA (216-963-1689)
- Dan Martin, Lorain County Metro Parks (800-4CM-PARK)
- Brad Moi, Oberlin College Environmental Studies Program (440-775-8409)
- Medina Soil and Water Conservation District (330-722-2605)
- Ken Pearson, Oberlin College Environmental Studies Program (440-775-8409)
- Andy Vida, study team coordinator for the Black River Remedial Action Plan, Northeast Ohio Arrowside Coordinating Agency (216-241-2414)

Ready to be a scenic river?
With all the interest now focused on the Black River, some observers are suggesting that it might qualify for inclusion in the Ohio Scenic River System. The purpose of establishing scenic rivers is to assist in the protection and preservation of the few remaining natural rivers in the state. The primary objectives of the program are to protect aquatic species and maintain sufficient stream-side forest corridors. The honorary scenic river designation imposes no restrictions on local landowners, but it can help a community recognize that it has a special resource to protect and can provide a framework for preservation efforts.

At the prompting of local communities and Rivers Unlimited, a statewide advocacy group, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) has been studying whether portions of the Black qualify as a scenic river. ODNR scientists are looking for segments at least 10 miles long with good water quality, a diversity of aquatic life, and protective forest cover along at least 25 percent of the river banks.

A final recommendation awaits the results of water quality studies conducted this summer by Ohio EPA. Preliminary findings indicate that one part of the Black’s East Branch—the segment through the Metro Parks’ Indian Hollow Reservation—comes close to meeting scenic river standards.

“Parts of the East Branch are as nice as any river in Ohio,” Russell Gibson, ODNR’s Scenic River coordinator for Northwest Ohio, said at a recent meeting.

Unfortunately, while this stretch looks like an unspoiled stretch of river, its fish and insect communities have not been as diverse as they could be. It’s hoped that this summer’s fish studies can determine if the fish are recovering or whether they are still being impacted by poor conditions upstream.

Other parts of the river are much less likely to qualify. The mainstem of the river, which begins at the confluence of the East and West branches in Elyria, has too many bridge crossings and problems with urban runoff. The West Branch is heavily impacted by farm runoff and sediment loading. Thus, it seems like ODNR will not recommend any part of the Black for scenic river status. A final decision should come next spring.

Special habitat
The Black River watershed provides critical habitat for a number of state threatened and/or protected plant and animal species:
- Rare plants: Northern water-platan, Canadian buffalo-berry, long beech fern, radic acid sedge, closed gentian, purple sand-grass, northern fox-grass, yellow vetchling, round-leaved dogwood, American chestnut, swamp cottonwood.
- Rare animals: Bigtooth chinch, common snake, spruce vole, and possibly the common brown owl.

One hopeful finding from Black River fish studies: While the Black River has poor water quality and fish communities tolerant of polluted water, its tributaries are the only place in the watershed where the sensitive bigmouth shiner is found. Thus, there are refuges of high quality fish which can re-establish diverse fish communities in the river if water quality can be improved.

Nonpoint source pollution: Construction sites, like this one in a wetland area near I-90 and SR 254, contribute to urban runoff problems in the Black River watershed.

Vermilion wild and scenic?
While the Black River has been getting a lot of attention, its neighbor to the west, the Vermilion, is still a largely unrecognized jewel. The relative obscurity has suited the Lorain County Metro Parks just fine, as the park district has been quietly buying up land along the river. This protected river corridor will be a great natural legacy for Lorain County.

Local river watchers believe the Vermilion will easily qualify as a state scenic river. Portions of it might even qualify for "wild and scenic" status, given the extent of intact forest cover along its banks. (Only two other stream segments in Ohio have been designated wild and scenic—portions of the Grand River in Lake County and Little Beaver Creek in Columbiana County.)

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources has not yet evaluated the Vermilion for scenic river designation, but it would do so if it received indications of grassroots support, such as resolutions from cities and townships along the river.

"The Vermilion has strong attributes," says Russell Gibson of the state’s Scenic River program. "We are very interested in studying it."
Land and water

Managing growth and water quality in Northeast Ohio

Sewers are destiny

Along with highway access, the availability of sewer facilities determined where large-scale development happens in Northeast Ohio. Without a public sewer system, water quality concerns typically limited development to low-density housing, such as single-family homes on lots large enough to accommodate individual septic systems. Sewers create the potential for higher density housing, as well as commercial and industrial development. So the location of sewers and wastewater treatment plants is a key planning issue—indeed, the entire planning process is determined by regional development patterns, the environmental quality of our streams and the long-term costs of infrastructure in our communities.

Unfortunately, it's also one of those complex infrastructure issues that transcends political boundaries. Each river flows through multiple municipalities. Specifically, the plan will cover five watersheds in seven counties (the Black, Rocky, Cuyahoga, Chagrin and Grand river basins in Cuyahoga, Lorain, Medina, Summit, Portage, Geauga and Lake counties).

- A long-term consideration of the impacts of land use and development on water resources.
- The 208 planning process is being led by a task force of public officials from the seven counties. It's being staffed by the Northeast Ohio Area Coordinating Agency (NOACA) and the Northeast Ohio Four County Planning and Development Organization (NEFCO). Funding comes from a $315,000 planning grant from U.S. EPA and $150,000 from NOACA and NEFCO.

Key questions

The plan seeks to address a number of important water quality questions.

- Sewered areas. What areas of the region will get sewers and what areas won't? Where should sewer lines be extended in order to correct existing water quality problems (such as malfunctioning home septic systems) or to accommodate future development? How far should interceptors serve large pipes that convey wastewater directly to treatment plants? Should Akron continue extending its lines into surrounding townships as part of joint economic development agreements?

Goals of Northeast Ohio’s water quality management plan

- The plan should take a watershed approach that coordinates management agencies addressing point and nonpoint pollution sources. The intent is to take a holistic approach and address all the factors which affect water quality.
- The plan should optimize use of the existing investment in infrastructure, not encourage public investments in new infrastructure. It will make sure the region's $2-3 billion investment in water quality improvements during the past 25 years continues to pay dividends.
- The plan should be proactive of what has been gained in environmental quality with particular attention to enhanced protection of critical water resource areas, such as those tributary to State Resource Waters. In other words, protect the gains made in urban areas, and guard against the degradation of pristine waters in rural areas of the region.
- The plan should provide a regional framework for locally determined development identity that is protective of water quality. The 208 process will help communities think through various development scenarios and what forms of development will be sustainable in the long run.
- The planning process should be a tool for educating local public decision makers on regional water quality management issues. It can help them understand the regional impacts of local actions. And it can help them appreciate the regional significance of water resources in their communities.

Major initiatives

- The plan update process
- Identification of critical environmental resource areas to be protected in the region (e.g., high quality streams, wetlands, habitat areas, drinking water supplies). Seek a regional consensus on these critical areas. What do we really want to save?
- Update of the region's wastewater facility planning areas (the "sewered" areas treated by plans). Operators of local sewer systems are being asked to map out their current service areas and areas programmed for sewers in the next 20 years and for which no sewer plans exist. Options for future sewer growth include regional interceptor sewers, local centralized treatment plants or large-scale septic systems with no discharge of effluent.
- Identification of areas of projected development in currently unseen areas. Those will likely be areas of future water quality problems.
- Improved state agency procedures for evaluating and approving wastewater management plans so critical areas are protected and nonpoint pollution sources are held in check.
- Recommended improvements with county agency procedures for evaluating and approving wastewater management plans that are protective of critical areas.
- Recommended improvements with county agency procedures for urban sediment and storm water runoff control.
- Coordination with existing watershed planning efforts.
Background on 208 planning

The original 208 plan for Northeast Ohio was completed in 1979 and updated in 1984. It came in the aftermath of the Clean Water Act, when the burning Cuyahoga River was fresh in public consciousness.

As the federal government invested billions to upgrade wastewater treatment plants in urban areas, it wanted to make sure that local wastewater authorities had sensitive plans for spending the money. So it required regional coordination to address the most serious water quality problems.

The first 208 plan essentially laid out a 20-year program for building and financing the wastewater treatment system we have today. In many respects, the plan was successful. Most of the facilities were built. Most of the region's public sewage treatment plants are now meeting water quality standards. And our streams and Lake Erie are not as grossly polluted.

New development pressures

Today, the federal grants for wastewater improvements have dried up, so no federal carrot is motivating the region to do 208 water quality management plans. But a new set of circumstances has prompted a revival of the 208 process in Northeast Ohio.

First, there is a growing awareness that many of our worst water quality problems now begin as land use problems—specifically, the sprawling development patterns of suburbanization. As shopping malls and subdivisions push into previously undeveloped areas, fragile streams are turned into silt-laden drainage ditches, valuable wetlands are filled, and more polluted stormwater flows off streets, parking lots and rooftops. It is hoped that a new plan for protecting water quality can address some of these development issues.

Second, water quality advocates in Ohio also are concerned about recent changes in the state's antidegradation rule. "A*ndegradation" is the anti-backsliding principle of the Clean Water Act. It basically says that clean water should remain clean, and dirty water should not be allowed to get any dirtier. The state should not allow water to be degraded unless there is a compelling social or economic reason, and only then where there is no alternative.

The Ohio EPA formerly could use the antidegradation rule to stop new water pollution sources near high quality streams. Developers had trouble obtaining discharge permits for shopping centers and other big projects in unwanted areas. But in 1993 state legislators snuck a provision into a budget bill which required Ohio EPA to weaken Ohio's antidegradation rule. The new rule, which is being challenged in court by environmental groups, allows big pollution increases in many clean streams in the state.

"The rule allows discharges in streams where we used to deny permits," said Ohio EPA's Keith Riley at a recent meeting of the 208 plan task force. "Whole new areas of the region are now open up for development."

These worrisome trends are motivating local officials to take a more thoughtful approach to development.

"We need to look 20 years ahead again," says John Beeker, manager of NOACA's environmental programs. "We've succeeded in building large wastewater treatment plants, but large problems remain. We need a broader perspective."

Challenges of regional cooperation

It's a challenge to get the more than 200 sovereign communities in Northeast Ohio to agree on anything, much less something as fundamental as a water management plan that shapes development patterns. Indeed, just the mention of a "regional plan" raises suspicions of some local officials.

So the planners at NOACA and NEFCO are going out of their way to emphasize that they are not trying to take away land use controls from local communities. "The agencies are not trying to drive an agenda," says Beeker. "But we can help establish regional areas for protection and broker agreements to protect them."

Ultimately, the plan will have to be something local elected officials will buy into.

To forge a regional consensus, the plan will have to be persuasive, Beeker adds. It will have to rely on "good arguments, good science and good sense."

When a consensus plan is completed, it will then go through a complex ratification process involving the boards of NOACA and NEFCO and then local governments. The plan must then be certified by the state and U.S. EPA.

Once the 208 plan is in effect, however, it could have regulatory teeth. For example, if a community wants to offer extra protections for a drinking water supply or other critical water resource, it can get its desire written into the plan. Then Ohio EPA will have to enforce the plan—perhaps by requiring stricter effluent standards for new dischargers or by refusing to issue permits.

Another thing the plan could do is set enforceable priorities for who gets to use public wastewater treatment plants. Currently, if a plant has excess treatment capacity, new customers can hook up on a first-come, first-serve basis. But a community could decide to reserve some of that capacity for development in areas designated for growth and restrict tie-ins from areas best left undeveloped. In that sense, the plan could become a tool for managing development. As a region, we can declare our intent to protect certain resources—scenic rivers, high quality headwaters, drinking water supplies—and the 208 plan can be the legal tool to enforce our desires. It can help give power to local land use controls.

"Towns often lack tools to control growth," says Andy Vida of the NOACA staff. "This process will give them a few more tools."

An opportunity

A good water quality management plan will need widespread public support, otherwise it will be vetoed by those who have a stake in business as usual. Citizens throughout the region need to become engaged in the process and tell their elected officials that they want a plan that will slow wasteful sprawl and promote more sustainable patterns of development.

The 208 planning process gives us all one opportunity to think about what's happening to the land and water in Northeast Ohio. If we can think through what we want, we can create strong controls to protect water quality. If we can agree on where development is desirable, we will all be better off as a region.

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View from US 422: The upper Cuyahoga River in Geauga County is a relatively pristine area of abundant wetlands. But development pressures—and the push for new sewer systems—are spreading out along the new US 422 highway.

Geauga County: Geauga is a headwaters area, the location of many small, high-quality streams and the source of Akron's water supply. As a result, it lacks sites where big sewage treatment plants can discharge without severely damaging water resources. This, and the need to protect well water from contamination by home sewage systems, has helped to limit development in the county. But wastewater treatment technologies are improving, and there will be increasing pressure to site new treatment plants to accommodate development sprawling eastward from Cuyahoga County. The weakening of the state's antidegradation rule also will open the door to more intense development.

Medina County: Two big treatment plants in Medina County—one on the west branch of the Rocky River and one on the east branch—could probably be doubled in size under current water quality regulations. That would pave the way for tremendous growth. If residents want to limit development and preserve some of the county's rural character, they should seek tougher water quality standards for the Rocky River.

Lorain County: Some political leaders want townships near Elyria to develop with new sewers. But they want the sewer lines to tie into the French Creek treatment plant instead of Elyria's on the Black River. That way the townships outside of Elyria will be annexed to the city. Both plants can accommodate growth, but Lorain County has a lot of flat, poorly drained land where development will be threatened with chronic flooding problems.

Portage County: Land uses in northern Portage County must protect the water quality of Lake Rockwell, which is Akron's primary water supply reservoir. Groundwater quality is also a concern for people with wells.

Summit County: The City of Akron is forming Joint Economic Development Districts (JEDDs) to entice water and sewer lines in surrounding townships in exchange for tax revenues. One controversial plan would divert Cuyahoga River water to areas south of Akron outside of the Lake Erie basin. Most of the water would be returned as effluent from the Akron wastewater treatment plant.
Fact Sheet: Northeast Ohio Water Quality Management Plan

What is the Northeast Ohio Water Quality Management Plan? In 1975, the Governor of the State of Ohio designated the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency (NOACA) as a Water Quality Management Agency under Section 208 of the Clean Water Act. NOACA continues to serve in this capacity on behalf of Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, and Medina counties. The Northeast Ohio Four County Planning and Development Organization (NEFCO) serves the same role in Putnam, Stark, and Wayne counties. Together, NOACA and NEFCO are undertaking a major update of the region's Water Quality Management Plans which were originally developed in the late 70s. A 208 Water Quality Planning Task Force has been formed to assist in this undertaking. The task force includes representatives of municipalities, counties, sanitary sewer agencies, boards of health, planning commissions, county park districts, soil and water conservation districts and watershed advisory bodies from each of the counties in the Northeast Ohio 208 planning area. They are charged with updating the Northeast Ohio Water Quality Management Plan to guide future land use and watershed management decisions in the region. This task force is chaired by Erwin Odahl of the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District and David Credell of the Akron Department of Public Utilities.

What is the planning area? The planning area encompasses five watersheds in Northeast Ohio that are tributary to Lake Erie. From east to west, these are the watersheds of the Grand, Chagrin, Cuyahoga, Rocky and Black rivers. The planning area also includes interbasin areas (such as Doan Brook) which drain directly to Lake Erie in Lake, Cuyahoga and Lorain counties.

Why develop a water quality management plan? People in Northeast Ohio continue to migrate out of the established urban cores. They are leaving homes and neighborhoods in the urban core while consuming undeveloped land for new homes, factories, and businesses. This is subjecting the region's population to increased burdens of financing infrastructure, including wastewater treatment capabilities, to meet new demands for service. It is also subjecting our water resources to a variety of environmental stresses.

Previous water quality management efforts have resulted in marked improvements in local water quality by concentrating on the control of large existing treatment plants and major sources of hazardous materials. Now it is necessary to move to protect those gains by developing a regional strategy that manages growth in a manner that is friendly to the environment, that minimizes the need for costly new treatment works, and that maximizes the use of existing infrastructure. The development of a water quality management plan affords an opportunity to do this.

How will the public be involved in the water quality management planning process? Meetings with the public are planned to take place at the outset of the project (Spring, 1997), halfway through the planning process (Spring 1998) and during the review of the 208 Water Quality Management Plan (Fall, 1998). The purpose of the first set of meetings is to inform the public of the 208 planning process, ascertain the public's concerns on environmental and regional issues of importance in their watersheds and utilize that information in formulating the 208 plan update. The second set of meetings will provide the public an opportunity to review the planning findings and tools that have been developed. The purpose of the third set of public meetings is to provide for public review and comment on the draft plan update and ensure that the public's original concerns have been addressed in the final plan.

For more information: If you are interested in planning involved in the Northeast Ohio 208 Water Quality Planning Process, please contact:
- Cindy Petkus at NOACA, 668 Fishtail Ave, Suite 400, Cleveland, OH 44114, (216-241-2414, ext. 232).
- Claude Custer, at NEFCO, 969 Copley Rd, Akron, OH 44320, (330-836-5731).

Source: NOACA and NEFCO

ISTEA at the wire

The reauthorization of the key federal transportation bill, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), is reaching its final stages in Congress. Transportation activists are urging citizens to contact their senators and representatives with the following messages:

- Keep the bill's provisions for local control over transportation funds, flexibility in the use of funds, and opportunities for local involvement in transportation planning.
- Keep the bill's environmental provisions, such as requirements for environmental review and funding for projects to reduce congestion and improve air quality.
- Keep the emphasis on maintaining existing roads and bridges, not on costly new highways.
- Make sure there is adequate funding for transit and job access programs for people coming off welfare.
- For updates on the transportation policy debates in Congress, check the Web site www.iste.org.

Housing our hero

Good friend Tom Bier recently won national recognition for helping to change the capital gains provision of the federal tax code. Bier, the director of the Housing Policy Research Program at Cleveland State University, has spent many years studying homebuyers in Northeast Ohio. He has documented the overwhelming majority of people move up to more expensive homes—homes which tend to be located farther out from the urban core of the region. One motivation for moving up in price is avoidance of capital gains taxes—a 25 percent tax on the profit from selling a home.

Bier argued, therefore, that the capital gains provision in the planning involved in the Northeast Ohio 208 Water Quality Planning Process, please contact:
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Brownfield cleanup shortcuts

Under new rules intended to speed up the cleanup and redevelopment of abandoned factory or commercial sites, EPA is beginning to relax cleanup requirements in urban areas where people do not use groundwater. The first such Urban Setting Designation (USD) was approved recently for a site owned by Catholic Charities in Cleveland's Flats neighborhood.

Ohio's Voluntary Action Program allows someone to voluntarily clean up contaminated property without the risk of liability. Under the program, groundwater cleanup is required where contaminated groundwater poses risks to the community or the environment. In urban areas where no one uses groundwater, however, a USD can lower costs of cleanup. The designation says, in effect, that it makes little sense to clean up when drinking water standards if no one is drinking it.

The Hough site at 6710 Lexington Ave., formerly operated by a dry cleaning company, and soil is contaminated with solvents. Catholic Charities plans to build a community center and cover the contaminated soil with a liner designed to prevent soil from coming into contact with people.

While appreciating the need for a new community center in a low-income neighborhood, environmental activists in Cleveland are concerned about a designation that will allow groundwater contamination to be passed over and forgotten. They fear that, even if present risks are low, the contamination could eventually migrate to streams and public water supplies.

Now the City of Cleveland is working with neighborhoods. For more information, to obtain an Urban Setting Designation for large parts of the city, if allowed, the city will have a blanket designation for high priority development areas, and individuals will not have to apply on a site-by-site basis for each new project. Officials in Akron and Toledo are also pursuing USDs for large areas of their cities.

The issue highlights how hard it is to balance environmental concerns and the need for urban redevelopment. For more information, contact Neighborhood Progress Inc. at 216-268-6240 or Citizen Action at 216-861-5200.

No low-level rad dump

We reported in our April/May issue that the process to site a low-level radioactive waste facility in Ohio is running into trouble. Now the process is dead.

On June 26, the commission responsible for developing a facility for six midwestern states voted to halt naming activities in Ohio. The commission cited several reasons for its action, including decreased volumes of waste produced, access to currently operating disposal facilities elsewhere, and the projected high costs to construct a regional facility (possibly more than $200 million).

Not cited was the growing political opposition to the dump in Ohio. More than 250 communities and 17 counties passed resolutions opposing the dump, thanks to grassroots activities.

Anti-nuclear activists are continuing to promote a state constitutional amendment to prohibit out-of-state radioactive waste from being stored in Ohio. And since nearly all radioactive waste comes from nuclear power plants in operation, the plants are working to close the plants and accelerate the transition to energy efficiency and vulnerable energy sources. For more information, call Citizens Protecting Ohio at 614-224-8206.

All-American river?

Local efforts are under way to nominate the Cuyahoga River as an "American Heritage River." President Clinton announced the new hydrological city of 1997 in his State of the Union Address. By early next year the federal government will select 10 rivers to be recognized for their notable resource qualities, restoration programs and broad community support.

Supporters believe the Cuyahoga has a good chance of being selected because it is such a national symbol—first as the "burning river" symbol of environmental crisis and now more recently as a promising symbol of recovery. Designation also would complement the National Heritage Corridor designation won recently by the Ohio & Erie Canal Corridor, which follows the Cuyahoga River between Akron and Cleveland.

If designated, the Cuyahoga River would receive special recognition and more focused and coordinated federal support. A "River Revitalization" plan would be assigned to help implement the community's vision for river protection. No new federal regulations would be imposed.

For information on how to support the nomination, contact the Cuyahoga River Remedial Action Plan Coordinating Committee at 216-243-223, or write to the commission at 7 p.m., October 22, at the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area, Canal Visitor Center, Canal and Hillside roads in Valley View.

Celebrating Doan Brook

It's hard to think of another urban creek in the Cleveland area with as much potential as a natural and recreational resource as Doan Brook, which flows through the Ulrich Miller Garden Circle. To celebrate the 200th anniversary of the settling of the Doan Brook, the nature center at Shaker Lakes has declared 1998 "to be the Year of the Brook."

In cooperation with the Joint Committee on Doan Brook Watershed (the committee arising from the fight to stop the Clark Fowery from tearing through the Shaker Lakes), the nature center has sponsored a brook walk to explore the brook and a "vision workshop" that will form the basis of a watershed protection plan.

For information on future events, call the nature center at 419-211-2421.

 Patching Grand river banks

By paving over the countryside, urbanization is bringing stormwater and erosion to residential areas in the east end of Cleveland. The Lake County Soil and Water Conservation District is now offering to help landowners stabilize their river banks with bio-engineering methods. Bio-engineering uses mostly natural materials and plants to help heal eroding streams.

The district is seeking five sites along the Grand River and its tributaries in Lake County for the cost-share program. The district will design, supervise, and construct "a riparian corridor" as defined by the cost of materials used. People with problem stream banks can call 440-350-2790.

Urban stream data

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District recently updated its report, Environmental Water Quality Assessment. The report includes voluminous water quality information, sampling data and maps. It's probably the most comprehensive and user friendly available about urban rivers and creeks in Greater Cleveland. For more information, call Frank Foley at 216-641-6000.

October 31

Critical Mass ride starting at 5:30 p.m. at Cleveland Public Square. Call 416-509-239 for details.

November 1

Swan search at Euclid Beach Reservoir to spot migratory waterfowl. For more information, call 216-843-7272.

November 11

Community railroad car at Cleveland Amtrak Station, sponsored by Greater Cleveland RTA.

November 13

Cleveland Engineering Society environmental conference on new air quality standards and their impact on business. For more information, call Great Lakes United at 716-866-0142.

November 15

Organizational meeting for 1000 Friends of Ohio, a new organization focusing on growth in Cleveland celebrated its 50th anniversary, November 15, at 7:30 p.m. at the Voinovich Center at Cleveland State University. For more information, call 216-722-5007 for details and more information.

November 16

Ohio county economic development conference in Akron. Call 416-461-6392 for registration information.

November 21-22

Cleveland Area Work Shop on open space design for conservation subdivisions, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Kellogg Center, 9500 Sperry Rd. in Kentland. Call 419-321-6450 for reservations.

November 21-22


November 22

Workshop on open space design for conservation subdivisions, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Kellogg Center, 9500 Sperry Rd. in Kentland. Call 419-321-6450 for reservations.

November 25

Monthly meeting of the Cleveland Energy Group, SEED Ohio, with a talk by a professional photographer at NASA. Call 216-321-4323 for information.

November 15

Conference on new approaches to rural land use planning, in Springfield, Ohio. Sponsored by the Management Change Coalition in South Ohio. Call 513-933-1187.

November 19-21

1999 Cleveland Ecovillage design workshop hosted by the Detroit Shoreway Community Development Organization and Eco City Cleveland. Call 216-961-4424 or 216-972-3007 for more information.

CoAmerican survival pact?

"The future will require us to build better places, or the future will belong to other people in other societies." Urban critic James Howard Kunstler was the subject of a conference at the Cleveland State University at the end of October. Kunstler is the author of The Geography of Nature, a scathing critique of the currently dominated landscape. His most recent book, From Stories, offers examples of how to design communities to enhance the public realm and strengthen civil life.

October 30 at 2 p.m. — Conference of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies at Marriott Key Center in downtown Cleveland. Call 416-446-2613 for reservations.

November 20-21

Ohio community economic development conference in Akron. Call 416-461-6392 for registration information.

November 20-22

Workshop on open space design for conservation subdivisions, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Kellogg Center, 9500 Sperry Rd. in Kentland. Call 419-321-6450 for reservations.

November 24-25

Enriching the public realm

The Committee for Public Art is sponsoring, "Enhancing the Public Realm," a series of four public programs to look at the future of Cleveland's public spaces and urban fabric:

October 8 — Lecture on revitalizing public parks, waterfronts and streets by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers of the Cityscapes Institute.

October 25-26 — Lecture on the landscape of cities and great public places by landscape architect Laurie Olin. Both lectures will be at 7 p.m. at the Cleveland Public Library, Louis Stokes Wing, 3375 Euclid Avenue. For more information, call 216-621-5330.

Transportation and urban sprawl

Dan Carlson, author of At Home's End: Transportation and Land Use Choices for Communities, will speak at a brown-bag lunch seminar, noon, October 30 at the Cleveland State Urban and Regional Planning Department at the Columbus of Urban Affairs, corner of E. 18th and Euclid Avenue. Call 216-877-2289 for more information.
Although Northeast Ohio is not growing very much as a whole, certain communities are booming as development follows Interstate highways out from the region's urban core. During the past 15 years, new housing construction has been concentrated in suburbs such as Avon Lake, Westlake, Strongsville, Hudson, Solon, and Mentor. As these communities grow, older communities in the region are declining.

"Indispensable reading for those who want to know what's really going on in the region or what the headlines may be a decade from now." —David Orr, Oberlin College Environmental Studies Program

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