



Groups to launch Deep River-Burns Waterway improvement effort

JANUARY 19, 2014 6:30 PM • [TIMES STAFF](#)

HOBART | Local communities and organizations will join with the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission on Tuesday to kick off a project to improve water quality and restore aquatic habitats in the Deep River-Portage Burns Waterway watershed.

"I can't stress enough how important it is to engage as many partners as possible when dealing with something as challenging as stormwater runoff," said Joe Exl, a water resource planner with NIRPC and the project's coordinator.

"It's one of the biggest threats to our region's streams and ultimately Lake Michigan. By using a watershed approach, we can begin to understand what the most important issues are, prioritize what work needs to be done and then combine resources to make positive changes that benefit the region as a whole."

Tuesday's launch event is set for 1 p.m. at the Hobart Community Center in Festival Park, 111 East Old Ridge Road. The event will be the first in a series of public meetings providing an overview of the four-year project.

The program will include a brief description of the watershed and document any watershed concerns identified by attendees.

Information gathered will be used for the guidance of a steering committee, which will draft a watershed management plan that provides a framework to improve water quality and aquatic habitats.

NIRPC identified the watershed as a priority area in a 2011 study because of the nearly 125 miles of stream in the watershed listed as "impaired" by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management.

The impairment designation means portions of these streams do not currently meet state water quality standards or their ability to support swimming and fishing are at risk.

NIRPC was awarded a \$455,550 grant from IDEM to develop and begin implementing a watershed management plan to address the negative impacts associated with stormwater runoff from urban and agricultural areas. The runoff can carry pathogens, sediment and nutrients into nearby streams.

The watershed includes several municipalities within its boundaries, including all of Hobart, Lake Station, Merrillville and New Chicago and portions of Cedar Lake, Crown Point, Gary, Griffith, Portage, St. John, Schererville and Winfield.

"This watershed plan will provide valuable information to prioritize/define management strategies," said Matt Lake, executive director of the Merrillville Stormwater Utility.

"The key is having all of the stakeholders participate to ensure this document is not just another plan that sits on the shelf collecting dust."

Tim Kingsland, stormwater district coordinator with Hobart, said he understands that protecting Lake George and Deep River requires coordination among the region's community stormwater programs and the development of partnerships with businesses, agricultural producers and interested stakeholders.

Working together with communities upstream is important for Portage because the city sits at the confluence of the waters before they flow into Lake Michigan, Portage Park Superintendent Jenny Orsburn said.

"The city of Portage values Lake Michigan and its contributing waterways, and this planning effort is vital to their protection," Orsburn said.