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White River shows the signs of annual cleanups

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Volunteers have been hauling everything from cars to washing machines out of the White River in Hamilton County for 15 years now.

According to River Clean-Up, the nonprofit group that organizes an annual cleaning, 365 tons of trash and thousands of tires have been removed over the years.

So how much cleaner is the river?

Steve Schwartz knows the waterway as well as anyone. He founded White River Rescue to restock the river after a 1999 fish kill, helps with the annual cleanup and rents canoes for a 16-mile stretch from Perkinsville to Noblesville.

"Canoers tell me this is a beautiful river," Schwartz said. "They don't see the washing machines anymore, the cars, the garbage."

The river has drawn David Letterman, host of CBS "Late Show with David Letterman," for canoe trips several times. Schwartz said Letterman stopped to pick up half a dozen pieces of garbage over the 16-mile trip this spring. With miles in between each offending piece, Schwartz said that's a testament to how little garbage remains.

The biggest change for the river, Schwartz said, is the people.

"Thirty years ago it was not uncommon for people to load up their pickup trucks with garbage from their garages and dump the stuff right on the river bank. Today, that's totally not acceptable."

Things have gotten better, said Tim Stottlemeyer of Noblesville's wastewater utility, but the next challenge deals more with problems that can't be seen. Rain hits developments with impervious surfaces like concrete, and the water carries oil and other grime into waterways.

New regulations and technology are making things better, but he said "we've got a long way to go as a society, because of the way we develop our communities."

Part of it also includes educating people.

He said simple changes like washing cars on lawns or at car-wash businesses can make a difference. Harmful soap residue from cars washed in driveways or streets runs into storm drains and then into streams.

Stottlemeyer also said items such as old paint and used oil should be taken to the Household Hazardous Waste Center, 1717 Pleasant St., Suite 200, Noblesville.