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Public outrage pays off: The White River is cleaner

By Will Higgins
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The White River hasn't looked this good in years -- in 100 years, its advocates say -- and more progress is imminent.

A big step ahead came just last week, when the City-County Council voted to raise sewer rates 66 percent over four years to raise \$750 million for cleaning the White River and its tributaries.

Since 2005, the city has already spent about \$300 million on water quality.

That's a seismic shift for a river long degraded or ignored. In fact, the city's "defining geological feature," in the view of Friends of the White River Executive Director Kevin Hardie, lately has become something of a showplace.

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It is the focal point of greenways and the backdrop to concerts held at the state park that bears the river's name.

So as the 39th annual Earth Day rolls around this week, Indianapolis can point to the river as a sign of ecological progress but far from a job completed.

Raw sewage still gets dumped into it, just less than in the past. The push is on to restore the river's health.

"White River got no respect," said James Donlan, who has fished the river since the '70s and owns a bait shop on its west bank. "Now it gets respect, and it's due -- I'd say overdue."

The fishing is good and getting better. A decade ago, it would have been hard to imagine a fishing guide on the Indianapolis section of the White River; now there are two.

Some critical species of macroinvertebrates, the snails and such that can be key water quality indicators, are holding their own.

Hardie is particularly heartened by his finding of hellgrammite larvae, insect life that resembles the creature from the movie "Alien" but that is nonetheless delicate. Mussels, however, which are even more delicate, continue to be rare.

"The reason, I think, is that there's just a lot more people who care about the river," said John Winters, who has fished and explored the White River since the 1940s. "It used to be people just didn't care."

Ho-hum to hot-button

Winters recalls the lack of interest from his experience that first Earth Day, April 22, 1970. He was a

biologist with the state Health Department's Stream Pollution Control Board. He'd seen up close the river's sorry condition. Pollution had led to a loss of that key ingredient for animal life, oxygen.

"I started my job in '57," Winters said, "and at that time the oxygen concentration was so low I doubt there were any fish alive between Indianapolis and Martinsville."

On that first Earth Day, Winters was assigned to give a presentation on local water quality. "I went to this library in Castleton," he said, "and no one was there. Not one person."

Contrast that to 10 years ago, following a major fish kill caused by an Anderson company releasing toxic chemicals into the river. More than 300 angry people crowded into public hearings.

Later, protesters in canoes spoiled a photo op for then-Gov. Frank O'Bannon as he released fingerlings into the river. "Restock IDEM!" shouted the canoeists, who worried the state would not prosecute the case with sufficient zeal.

But the state got tough, extracting a \$14.2 million settlement from the culprit, Guide Corp.

Nearly half the money was spent on the river, on planting native grasses on the banks to better filter water runoff and making it easier for the public to get on the river, or at least get close to it.

Today, "the politicians are catching on," said Clarke Kahlo, the activist who led the canoe-in.

They're catching on to the White River's value, Hardie said, because of the force of the federal Clean Water Act and because the public has caught on, as more and more people were exposed to the river and liked what they saw.

That \$750 million tax hike the City-County Council approved last week under EPA pressure was only a fraction of the 20-year sewer project's total cost: \$3.5 billion.

Unfit for animals

Indianapolis was founded on the banks of the White River in 1820, in the hope steamboats would connect the town to the Wabash River and, by extension, the Ohio River and the rest of the world. It turned out the White River wasn't river enough for large steamboats, but Indianapolis was platted anyway.

And the river quickly became a convenient dumping ground. The city's first sewer system opened in the 1870s, whisking filth out of Indianapolis and straight into the river.

By the dawn of the 20th century, the river had been utterly fouled. Around the time of World War I, farmers downstream from Indianapolis sued the city for rendering the river unfit for watering crops or farm animals -- and won. One result was the city's first sewage treatment plant.

The state legislature since then enacted a series of laws aimed to curb industrial discharges, but raw sewage was still considered acceptable even in massive quantities, coursing through combined storm sewers that become overburdened during the slightest rain showers.

In addition, many residents thought (and some still think) nothing of dumping refuse off bridges and along out-of-the-way riverbanks: broken washing machines, roofing tiles, old tires.

"Nasty stuff," said Terry McWilliams, a fishing guide in his third season on the White River. "But there's a lot less of that these days."

Hardie also has noticed less dumping and attributes it to a new appreciation for the river brought on by increased exposure by way of the city's greenways. The trails were first developed in the late '90s, and several about the White River. The largest of them, the Monon Trail, crosses the river at two points.

The Monon's 1.2 million-a-year joggers, walkers, cyclists and skaters often pause on the bridges and take in a landscape that is pleasantly pastoral even though it's just a few blocks north of bustling Broad Ripple Avenue.

"There's parts of White River that feel like Canada," even stretches near some of the city's busiest malls, McWilliams said. "You see eagles, you see foxes -- and you can be a quarter-mile from Keystone Crossing."

A day of fishing with McWilliams costs \$300. The goal: smallmouth bass, a species that requires relatively clean water. Success is not guaranteed, but McWilliams and other anglers say that 20-inch bass -- that's a big bass -- are not uncommon.

McWilliams practices catch-and-release, as do most of the White River's sportsmen, for two reasons: A fish is too precious to be caught just once, and fish in the White River are contaminated with mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls.

"There's still work to do," said Tim Maloney of the watchdog Hoosier Environmental Council.

"There's a growing community consensus (the White River) is a really valuable resource," Maloney said, "and we are making progress.

"But I wouldn't say we're satisfied in the current condition. We can't stop here."

Additional Facts

WHAT GOES IN THE RIVER?

Besides raw sewage, the top pollutants from industrial and other sources in the city include acetone, a hazard found in paint and nail polish; a potentially harmful chemical found in window cleaner, spot remover and oven cleaner called butyl cellosolve; and isopropyl alcohol, another harmful substance used as an industrial solvent. Officials also monitor wastewater sent into the river for mercury, zinc, copper, nickel and other heavy metals that pose environmental risks.

Then there's just plain trash. This month, 200 volunteers spent a Saturday cleaning up the river, hauling out 10 tons of debris. To report illegal dumping, call the Mayor's Action Center at (317) 327-4MAC (327-4622).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- » Don't pour old paint, household cleaners or medicine down the drain.
- » Don't leave your dog's waste on the lawn, where rain can wash it into streams and rivers. Instead, dispose of it in the toilet.
- » Limit your use of insecticides and fertilizers.

DID YOU KNOW? WHITE RIVER FACTS

- » The West Fork of the river, which runs through Indianapolis, starts in a farmer's field in Randolph County.
- » The headwaters of the West Fork are farther east than the East Fork. The West Fork runs north for its first couple of miles before turning west, then south.
- » The steamboat Robert Hanna arrived in Indianapolis in April 1831, generating excitement about the river's possibilities. Then it ran aground, sinking hopes the river could be navigated by large crafts.
- » The West Fork runs 273 miles before it links up with the East Fork, then the White River runs

another 45 miles before it joins the Wabash River.

Sources: Friends of the White River, The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis

EARTH DAY INDIANA

» **When:** 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.

» **Where:** American Legion Mall, Downtown Indianapolis.

» **Details:** Free. Scores of exhibits, hands-on activities, music, fun stuff for kids and food. Web site: earthdayindiana.org.

A LOOK AT INDIANA'S FIRST EARTH DAY: APRIL 22, 1970

» Indiana University trustee Robert H. Menke proposes ban on "high-powered" cars on college campuses.

» Sen. George McGovern, D-S.D., tells a crowd at Purdue University: "Indeed, destruction of our environment may be the chief spin-off of all our technological innovations."

» Bernard J. McGuinness, a state Board of Health chemist, declares that pollution results from people becoming "sophisticated, which means increased industrial production."

» Indianapolis Mayor Richard Lugar tells students at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis that environmental problems are caused by affluence. Fifty billion aluminum cans would not be strewn throughout the nation, Lugar said, if Americans could not afford to throw things away.

» Former Sen. Homer Capehart, R-Ind., announces plans for a parade to call attention to litter.

» Public Service Indiana demonstrates an electric-powered car at DePauw University; also at DePauw, a student rides a horse through campus, carrying a sign that says: "Ban the automobile." The wind catches the sign, causing it to flap. The horse startles. The student is thrown. Unhurt, she gets to her feet, remounts and continues on.

--- *Will Higgins*
