

THE DAILY JOURNAL

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Thursday, October 16, 1997

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Time to act on river: officials Enough studies done, touring group declares

By Bill Byrns, Journal writer

An impressive array of federal, state, county and local officials, led by Lt. Gov. Bob Kustra, took a close look at the Kankakee River Wednesday. Most agreed the time has come for action.

"We don't need another study, we just need a list of what needs to be done and some kind of a budget on what it takes to get there," Kustra proclaimed, drawing a round of applause from the packed house at the Mokense Anchor Club.

"Then we have to go off to state and federal funding sources and demonstrate that this is high enough on the priority list to get it done," he said following a sandbar-bumping, logjam-dodging trip downstream from the State Line Bridge.

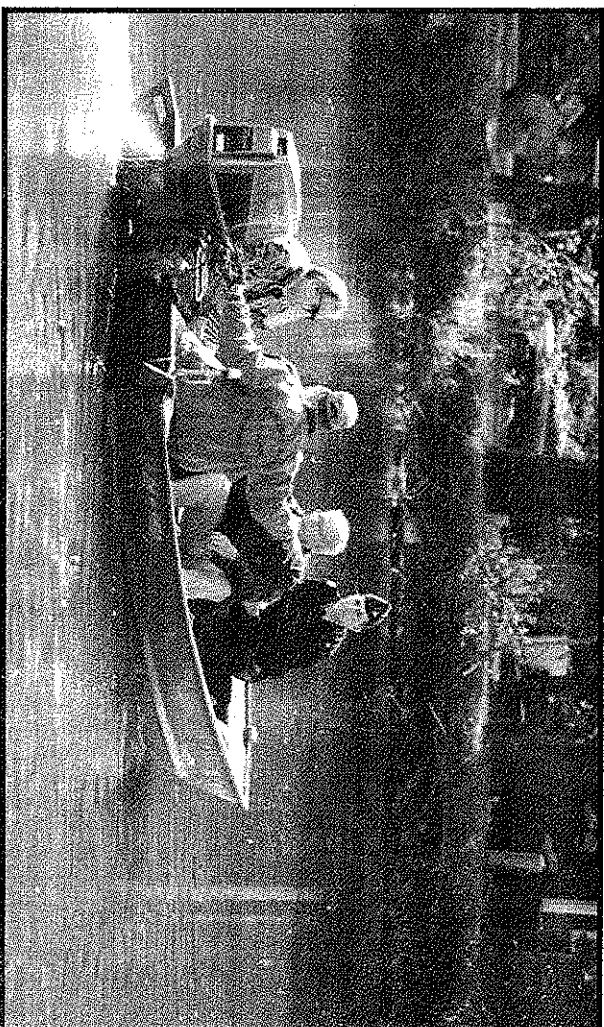
For organizers J. R. Black and Rep. Phil Novak, pulling together

this V.I.P. delegation is one major step in putting the Kankakee River at the top of several state and federal priority lists.

Kustra heard Lt. Col. Roger A. Gerber, of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, tell of the importance of his agency's basin wide efforts on the Kankakee in Illinois and Indiana.

Paul Terrio of the U.S. Geological Survey produced three recently-completed siltation studies, funded locally by the Alliance to Restore the Kankakee River, and said the goal now "is to keep the river moving along, not the sediment."

Equally important to the Corps' study was hearing both Illinois Department of Natural Resources Deputy Director John Comerio and Conservation 2000 chairman Brian Anderson promise "significant funds" coming to the Kankakee River "within the next month or so."



Journal/Bill Byrns

"We've passed the bend in the river today," Comerio said, noting that Black's recently formed Kankakee River Local Partnership Council "had put together the right combination of people for action on the river."

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Steve Engelking, back to camera, points out problem areas along the Kankakee River near the state line to Lt. Gov. Bob Kustra, center, and Lt. Col. Roger Gerber of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

River

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Referring to nearly \$2 million in project work KRLPC has recommended, Comerio told Black, "You're not getting everything but you will see significant funds."

Comerio says C2000 has roughly \$3.5 million to spend and over 55 project requests statewide. "Your projects will compete very well when the final cuts are made next month," he said.

Aides to Illinois Congressman Jerry Weller and Tom Ewing and Indiana Congressmen Steve Boyer took notes as did state Senators Larry Walsh and Patrick Welch and Rep. Mary Kay O'Brien. From the Indiana Kankakee River Basin Commission, a major partner in the Corps' now completed reconnaissance study of the river, came Executive Director Jodi

Melton and newly elected president Jack Nelson.

But Kusutra also noted the audience of "river rats" and locals who have watched with frustration the river's long, slow demise. "You've demonstrated by turning out today that you're awfully serious about this river."

"What I wanted today was to get a good look at the headwaters of the Illinois River," Kusutra said of his first visit after two abortive attempts earlier.

"What was most impressive was the beauty and wildness of the river," he said. "For a river that sits on the edge of one of the great urban areas of this county... it's a beautiful setting."

However some skeptical eyebrows raised as Kusutra, who will be leaving public office next year, pledged "we're going to be there for you; we're going to stand along beside you; we're going to make sure funding will be there

from federal and state sources and that when the tough calls have to be made we'll stand for you."

Clarifying himself later, Kusutra said, "one of the most important recommendations of the Illinois River Project was the creation of the Illinois River Coordinating Council which is a permanent group which will always be chaired by the Lt. Gov. no matter who he or she is."

"What I feel good about is — even though I will be leaving office — the new Lieutenant Governor will be given a perfect forum as the new chair of the river coordinating council."

"That council will be, I think, the driving force in the future to making rivers cleaner and to work on getting federal and state funding working together. It will assure future administrations remain focused on the problems of our rivers."

Action cannot come too soon for

Momence river men like Milt Weybright of the Kankakee River Conservancy District.

As he guided a boatload of visitors downstream, he pointed here and there to pieces of Paradise lost.

"We've lost 24 feet of shoreline here since 1924" Weybright said just downstream from the state line. Skimming sandbars and weaving through a watery gauntlet of logs and logjams, he brought visitors face to face with the river's woes.

Near State Line Bridge, Weybright worked his way up an old river channel now blockaded by tons of logs and sediment forcing the river to cut a new channel to the south.

"There are two bodies still under there," he said pointing to the decades-old logjam that still poses risks for unwary boaters or canoeists.

"We need to do something quickly for this river."