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Journal/Bill Byrns

PRAISING GRASSROOTS EFFORTS to restore the Kankakee River, U.S. Sen. Peter Fitzgerald (right) made his first trip to Momence Tuesday for a briefing on several state and federal projects in the planning stages. Joining Fitzgerald at the Momence Anchor Club were Congressmen Tom Ewing (left) and Jerry Weller.

River projects roll on

By Bill Byrns, Journal writer

MOMENCE — Freshman Republican U.S. Senator Peter Fitzgerald made his first trip to the Momence area Tuesday ostensibly for a briefing on the Kankakee River.

What he saw and heard surprised him.

"Rarely in this state have I seen such widespread interest and agreement for backing a local partnership," Fitzgerald said, obviously impressed by the mix of agricultural, conservation, business and other interests represented by the Kankakee River Partnership Alliance.

But Fitzgerald also took careful note of the standing-room-only crowd packed into the Momence Anchor Club to hear the latest news on river projects.

Joining Fitzgerald for the "river briefing" were his Republican Congressional colleagues, Reps. Tom Ewing and Jerry Weller and officials from the Army Corps of Engineers and Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

A brief video outlined the make-up and mission of the local partnership which has won nearly \$3 million in state grants for local ecosystem projects and land acquisitions.

Much of what the lawmakers heard during the hour-long meeting was "old" news to those in the audience.

Kankakee River Update Planned river improvements

- Chicago District Corps of Engineers is studying flood control
- Rock Island District Corps of Engineers will remove sand and sediment near the state line, restoring fish spawning areas
- The Grand Kankakee Marsh plan would create 33,000 acre wildlife refuge

Fitzgerald learned that the largest project in the 5,200 square mile river basin is the Chicago District Corps of Engineers' study of flood control, sedimentation and land practices across northeastern Illinois and northwestern Indiana.

That study is now in its feasibility stage with public meetings scheduled for October.

He also heard a brief report on the Corps' Rock Island District's project to remove sand and sediments from the river and restore wetland habitat near the Indiana state line.

According to Partnership Chairman J. R. Black, See RIVER, next page

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the preliminary restoration plan for the state line project has been approved by Rock Island and reviewed by the Chicago Corps office. It is now under review by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, which is sharing costs for the project.

If planning and cost controls stay on track, actual work at the state line could get underway early next year according to Corps officials. Sand removal remains a key part of the planning. However, the project also includes creating new wetlands habitat for fish to spawn.

Fitzgerald came armed with questions about several proposals targeting the river basin.

He wanted a better explanation of the size and location of the original Grand Kankakee Marsh and asked if the partnership had any long-range plans to restore portions of the marsh.

Black explained that the group's main focus is river restoration, "although in some cases we do have to have control of adjacent lands to control sedimentation and restore wetlands."

Fitzgerald's question was clearly prompted by lobbying efforts from the Illinois Sierra Club, a strong supporter of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plan to create a 33,000 acre wildlife refuge along the Kankakee River.

The partnership has maintained a neutral stance over the planned Grand Kankakee Marsh Refuge and has urged FWS to coordinate its planning with the Corps' basin-wide study.

Black and members of the Illinois

and Indiana natural resources departments, have a Thursday morning meeting at the FWS regional office in Minneapolis to discuss the refuge.

Fitzgerald also tried to clarify what work the Corps foresees from its basin study. Noting that specifics are premature, Deputy District Engineer John Sirles explained "we (the Rock Island Corps) are still collecting data for the feasibility study."

Kankakee County Highway Engineer Jim Piekarczyk, speaking from the audience, told Fitzgerald that FWS is the "biggest obstacle" to replacing the 84-year-old state line bridge. Six miles east of Momence, the bridge is the only river crossing between Illinois Route 17 and U. S. 41 in Indiana.

"The state of Indiana has agreed to use 80 percent of its federal funding for a new bridge," Piekarczyk said. Kankakee County and Lake and Newton counties have agreed to the replacement project with the lion's share of the \$780,000 project coming from federal funds allocated to Indiana for such projects.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is on record as being opposed to rebuilding the bridge because it is contrary to their plans for the Grand Marsh Refuge," Piekarczyk said.

However, according to their original letter, FWS's opposition was based largely on concerns that the higher roadway and longer bridge span would disrupt wildlife habitat at the adjoining LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area in Indiana. It also noted that the area may include habitat for the endangered Indiana bat.

Piekarczyk said the Kankakee County Board has gone on record as opposing plans for a national wildlife refuge east of Momence.

Fitzgerald promised to discuss Indiana plans for the Kankakee River with his colleagues, Republican Sen. Richard Lugar and Democrat Evan Bayh.

River plan could be model for Illinois

MOMENCE — Over \$55 million in federal funds for conservation projects, similar to those planned for the Kankakee River, could come into Illinois coffers if pending legislation is approved by Congress.

Co-sponsored by Congressmen Tom Ewing and Jerry Weller, the Conservation and Reinvestment Act, CARA, would provide federal assistance to local wildlife and habitat restoration work as well as helping to fund open space preservation and impact management for coastal waters.

"CARA is bipartisan legislation which provides for permanent, annual funding derived from nat-

ural, non-renewable resources to create and improve renewable resources," Weller said during a press conference Thursday in Momence. Funding for the program will come largely from oil and mining leases on federal lands and offshore drilling.

Ewing and Weller have also secured \$295,000 in the Energy and Water Development Appropriations package to continue the Army Corps of Engineers study of the flooding and sedimentation problems in the Kankakee River. Over the past five years, \$1,340,000 in federal funds has been awarded to the Corps' flood control study.