

Officials discuss fixing canal

By **Bev Woodruff**

Staff Writer

A group of approximately 30 individuals met last Wednesday, November 2, at the Hearthstone Restaurant in Metamora to discuss an upcoming rehabilitation project for the historic Whitewater Canal.

The Whitewater Canal was constructed in 1836 and at the time was a part of more than 2,600 miles of canals in the United States. The canal ran from Lawrenceburg to Cambridge City and connected the Whitewater Valley to the Ohio River. During its hey day the canal boats transported both passengers and freight up and down the canal.

In the 1860s, the canals were used less as the railroad became a more popular mode of transportation.



Bev Woodruff photo

Whitewater Canal just southeast of the feeder dam off Dam Road.

Historians say the Civil War soldiers went to war on the canal boats and came home on trains.

As trains became more popular and road systems improved, canal

transportation went by the wayside. Many old canals were destroyed with the building of our modern interstate road system; however, the
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Canal

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small section of the Whitewater Canal from the Laurel feeder dam to south of Metamora was spared. In 1946, the State of Indiana took over the management of a 14-mile section of the canal and began a restoration project. That section would later become the Whitewater Canal State Historic Site. The only working covered aqueduct in the United States can be found on the canal at the south end of Metamora.

The canal is currently suffering from silting of soil. Recently the silting has become so severe as to impair the operation of the Ben Franklin, the canal boat that operates during the tourist season in Metamora. Recently, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced it will receive funding from the state's general fund to be used on the canal.

Those attending last week's meeting include: DNR director Kyle Hupfer, Franklin County Soil and Water Conservation District board members Norman Klusman and Mike Schwab, Franklin County Commissioners Lou Linkel and Tom Wilson, District 43

State Senator Johnny Nugent and District 42 State Senator Bob Jackman, District 55 State Representative Robert Hoffman, Brookville/Franklin County Chamber of Commerce Executive Secretary Lois Clark, Whitewater Valley Railroad President John Hillman and Whitewater Canal Trail, Inc. President Mick Wilz.

"We have \$1.7 million to begin the project," said Hupfer. "The first step is to hire a professional consultant."

Hupfer added a high priority will be the silting-in of the southern end of the canal. He also stated some work may need to be done at the Laurel Feeder Dam. A silt trap can be installed at the feeder dam that will stop some of the silting from getting to the southern end of the canal.

"We plan to do only a minimal amount of dredging at this point to keep the boat operational," Hupfer said.

Senator Jackman asked if Hupfer had an idea of what the total cost of the project would be.

"We think in the \$3 million range," Hupfer answered. "This is a significant

historical site that draws a large amount of tourists, and we want to preserve that."

Jackman agreed with Hupfer.

"With this being the only canal left in the state, we want to do it right," Jackman said.

Another person asked if the DNR knows what is causing the silting.

Hupfer explained the area is a part of a very large watershed. The watershed encompasses five counties and approximately 400,000 acres.

"Anytime you have fast water flowing you will have silting," Representative Hoffman said. "It is a natural effect."

According to Klusman, a lot of silting is coming from the area directly east of the canal. He further stated the department of soil and water might be able to help with erosion control.

Hillman commented on the importance of the canal to the Whitewater Valley Railroad.

"The canal is a big part of railroad history," Hillman said. "If the canal had not been built, the railroad might not have been built there. We point out the canal to tourists taking the railroad trip from

Connersville to Metamora.”

Klusman asked if it might be possible to put a park and shelter at the Laurel feeder dam.

Hoffman stated he and Senator Jackman visited the dam earlier in the day

“ We were there approximately 25 minutes,” Hoffman said. “In that period of time, five cars pulled in. It could be one of the prettiest sites in Indiana. For whatever my nickel is worth, it sure would be nice to have a couple of picnic tables and a shelter there”

Hupfer stated the first concern is to try and get the canal back to its original width and depth. He added there is a potential to correct some of the silt problem at the dam, but pointed out it would not be the primary way to control the silting.

“There is no limit to what can be accomplished when we all get together and pull in the same direction,” Senator Nugent said. “We need to have a continuing dialog.”

According to Klusman, the meeting was not meant to be a criticism of the project.

“Kyle, it is not our intent to criticize, but we want you to know we have a group of



Bev Woodruff photo

Laurel's Feeder Dam on the Whitewater River's west fork supplies water to the Whitewater Canal. Legislators are talking about creating a state park at the site.

concerned citizens and organizations,” Klusman said.

Klusman added the project would need as many viable partners as possible.

Wilz volunteered to be the point person for

communications concerning the project. Interested persons may log on to the Whitewater Canal Trail, Inc. www.whitewatercanaltrail.com or e-mail Wilz at canaltrail@brookville47012.com.