

Wetland Partnership Meeting Summary
Thursday, December 13, 2013
Three Rivers Public Library – Three Rivers, Michigan
Coordinated by Friends of the St. Joe River Association (FotSJR)

Matt Meersman, President of the FotSJR welcomed everyone to the December quarterly meeting. The meeting began with introductions of all those in attendance.

IN ATTENDANCE: Grant Poole, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi; Jason Kauffman, Elkhart Co. SWCD; Bob Jones, LaGrange Co. SWCD; Karen Mackowiak, St. Joseph River Basin Commission; Maria Mast, St. Joe Co., IN MS4 & FotSJR; Matt Meersman, FotSJR; Marcy Colclough, SWMPC; Chris Bauer, MDEQ-WRD; Joe Schmees, IDEM; Geoff Cripe, SWMLC; Brian Gunderman, MDNR-Fisheries; Dona Hunter, former member of FotSJR.

OVERVIEW OF WETLAND PROJECT: Matt reported that this is the 4th year of the wetland grant project. There are two primary groups who are being targeted with education and outreach efforts - landowners who own significant wetlands in the watershed and municipalities in the watershed as they look at wetland protection in relation to planning and zoning.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND STATUS UPDATES - Marcy reported that the next quarterly report is due by the end of the month to EPA. She asked Karen Mackowiak to get her the amount of time Karen had spent working on the last event held for Planning and Zoning officials. Matt will provide a web traffic report at the end of the project (to date it had been done quarterly). Leah Cooper is still managing the website for this project; however, this work will probably continue to decrease. The grant has been extended through October 2014.

LANDOWNER OUTREACH EVENTS – Discussion was held on the next potential wetland events for landowners in the watershed. Geoff Cripe will work on finding a date for a meeting in the Colon/Athens area and will work with Eric Kerney on locations and date. The focus of this meeting will be on protecting the existing wetlands that are still in this area. Another meeting will be planned for late March or early April with the focus on restoration in the Ligonier area. The Elkhart River Restoration Association will be asked to host the event. Daragh Deeghan and Nancy Brown are both on the ERRA and FotSJR boards. Wawasee Are Conservancy District would also be a good group to get involved in this meeting. Scott Fetters, US Fish & Wildlife, will be invited to attend this meeting.

Geoff reported on work being completed in the Dowagiac River area under the Dowagiac Creek Corridor Project. The Pokagon Band is restoring the meanders in the river. And the Pucker Street Dam has been identified as a fish barrier removal project.

The data from the wetland project can be used to help document the need for restoration of wetlands in the watershed when organizations in the St. Joe River Watershed submit proposals for funding.

Matt will continue to be available to do presentations on the wetland project even after the grant is completed.

MUNICIPAL OUTREACH STRATEGY – A very successful workshop was held on December 4 with more than 45 people in attendance. American Planning Association credits were offered and several officials took advantage of those. Topics covered at the workshop included: an overview of wetlands in general; options for planning and zoning; presentation by Bob Thompson, Porter County, outlining what they have done with natural resource protection in their county. A checklist was provided for local officials to use when upgrading or reviewing their Master Plans and considering zoning options. The evaluations were overall very positive with many surprised about the extent of wetland loss in the area and what the local impact has been.

After reviewing the evaluations, it was apparent that the focus needs to be on commissioners and mayors – those individuals who actually made the decisions when it comes to local planning. Joe Schmees talked about statewide planning training for Plan Commission members. Possibly the next step should be for Matt and/or Marcy, or both, to attend county plan commission meetings in Indiana to present the wetland information. Marcy will contact Chris Godlewski, Elkhart Co. Plan Commission, and set up a meeting with them. Bob Jones will contact LaGrange Co. Plan Commission.

The next municipal event will be in Michigan. Early planning is to do two events – one east, maybe SW Michigan College and one west in the Coldwater area, at Glen Oaks or Branch Career Center. Portage might also be an option for one event.

Matt reported that Rachel Smith held a meeting in the Prairie River Watershed focusing on wetlands. This is another good place to promote the use of the functional wetland data.

DATA DELIVERY – Matt had nothing new to report on this aspect of the project. It is not really easy for the general public to access and understand this information. It costs money to host a GIS site on-line like Indiana Map. It might be possible to provide a link through the Friends website. Karen will set up a meeting with Matt to talk with the technical people who administer MACOGs website and on-line GIS application. It might be possible to have our data available through MACOG. Chris Bauer will do some checking through DEQ. Jason asked if the information can be provided to each individual county. Matt said that every county will get a copy of the information and a workshop will be held for GIS coordinators and local agencies to train them in the use of the data.

ADDITIONAL INFO: Joe Schmees said that Indiana is working on a statewide wetland plan with prioritization for Indiana to use when applying for wetland grant funds. Joe wanted Matt to be aware that the contractor may contact Matt for more detailed information about this project.

NEXT MEETING – The next meeting will be held on April 24, 2014, which is the 4th Thursday of the month.