

River Currents

Winter 2019



The Voice of the St. Joseph River Watershed

Mission: To unite a diverse group of stakeholders throughout the watershed in a collaborative effort to protect, restore and foster stewardship of the St. Joseph Watershed.

12th Annual St. Joseph River Watershed Celebration

WHEN: Friday, March 22, 2019
5:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.
WHERE: Sturges-Young Auditorium
201 N. Nottawa Street
Sturgis, Michigan

Al Smith Watershed Award Winners

The Friends of the St. Joe River (FotSJR) Board of Directors established the Al Smith Watershed Stewardship Award in 2012 to honor individuals who display a passion for the health of the watershed. More information about the award and nomination forms are available at

www.fotsjr.org/StewardshipAward. The award is named in honor of FotSJR founder Al Smith, who worked tirelessly to improve the St. Joseph River. Al passed away in 2011 at the age of 86. Since the award was established, the following individuals have been honored for their dedication to maintaining and improving the health of the watershed.

2012 – Bob Owens
2013 – Dona Hunter
2014 – Scott King
2015 – Marcy Hamilton
2016 – Gene Lightner
2017 – Mahlon Dunkel
2018 – Daragh Deegan

The 2019 Award winner will be announced at the Watershed Celebration.

COST: \$25.00/person (includes dinner and program materials). A cash bar will be available.

REGISTER BY: March 15, 2019. Register online (preferred) or by mail. Online credit card payments are processed through PayPal. If paying by check, make check payable to Friends of the St. Joe River and send it to P.O. Box 1794, South Bend, IN 46634. For registration and additional event details, go to <http://fotsjr.org>

FEATURED PRESENTATION: Feathered Friends of the River

Join the Friends of the St. Joe River at this year's Watershed Celebration to get up close and personal with the raptors you may have seen soaring high above the lakes and streams in your area. Hear about local birds of prey and conservation trends relating to raptors, falconry, and much more.

This presentation will be made courtesy of Lake Milton Raptor Education Center. Lake Milton Raptor Education Center was started by Aimee Pico and her husband, Matthew Pico, in 2001 in Ohio. In 2010, the Center was moved to its current location in the heart of the watershed, Jones, Michigan. Aimee and Matthew have been joined by Darlene Brockman and Jessica Brockman, along with other volunteers, in their rehabilitation and education efforts about raptors in the watershed.

The mission of the Center is "to give wild birds in need a second chance at a healthy, free life and to educate the public about the birds of prey that live around them in hope that people will realize these birds exist and to do what they can to live alongside them in harmony."



BECOME A FRIEND: Join a group of stewards restoring and protecting this natural resource. We offer a variety of tax-deductible membership levels for both personal and business contributors.

MESSAGE FROM THE VICE PRESIDENT

It's been a very interesting year for the Friends. In March of 2018, Matt Meersman, our leader, stepped down from the board after serving as President of the group for the past decade. Fortunately for the Friends, Matt is staying close as he focuses on his new role as Director of the St. Joseph River Basin Commission. The FotSJR was established by Al and Margaret Smith in 1994. When Al and Margaret transitioned away from their leadership role with the Friends, Matt stepped up to plate and took the organization to new heights. Under Matt's leadership, the Friends did some incredible work. He fostered a conversation with countless stakeholders from the 15 counties in two states that the Watershed encompasses, bringing natural resources workers and passionate people together to work on improving the watershed. Beyond the big projects he accomplished with the Friends, Matt's passion and his ability to bring people together and mediate difficult conversations will be sorely missed.

Fortunately for the Friends, a great new leader has been found in Jeff Reece. Jeff has been a Friend of the River for many years while working with Indiana Michigan Power. He is now taking his passion for the St. Joe River into retirement as the new President of the Friends. While Jeff recognizes that filling Matt's shoes will be tough, he is up for the challenge of leading the Friends into a new era. I write this note in Jeff's absence as he recovers from a knee surgery (Get well soon Jeff!). Under Jeff's leadership, the Friends Board is changing things up a little bit with monthly meetings. We are travelling around the watershed a little more than we used to, to try and engage members that can't make meetings up in Three Rivers. Jeff is also including a program in some of the monthly meetings so that we educate ourselves on important things happening in the watershed. I encourage all members to try and make at least one monthly board meeting a year to find out what's going on with the Friends and to be a little more active in trying to protect the St. Joseph River Watershed. Even if you can't make a board meeting, I hope you make it a point to attend the Annual Watershed Celebration held in Sturgis on March 22. The board is still putting the finishing touches on the event, but Matt will be back as our host and we promise an evening of good food and great people.

~ ~ ~ Daragh Deegan, Vice President

FotSJR LEADERSHIP

The Board of FotSJR consists of 15 members, each serving a three-year term beginning April 1. Board members are elected at the annual membership meeting and there is no limit to the number of terms they can serve. Officers serve a one-year term and are elected at the first board meeting following the membership meeting. The Board is also supported by an advisory Watershed Council consisting of representatives from each of the 15 Michigan and Indiana counties in the watershed, state agencies, and other key organizations.

Officers: Jeff Reece, (President), Daragh Deegan, (Vice President), Kim Sinclair, (Treasurer), Dona Hunter, (Secretary).

Board Members: Carolyn Grace, Carol Higgins, Roxanne Barton, Danielle Meersman, Bill Courliss, Eric Kerney, Grant Poole, Jeffrey Wenzel, John Law, and Ron Niezgodski, (one vacant seat).

The FotSJR typically holds eight regular board meetings, one annual membership meeting, and one watershed celebration event in March each year. All meetings are open to the public. For upcoming meeting dates, visit the website at <http://fotsjr.org>.

WATERSHED LEADERSHIP ACADEMY SCHOLARSHIPS

The FotSJR partnered with the St. Joseph River Basin Commission to award four scholarships to the 2019 Indiana Watershed Leadership Academy, sponsored by Purdue University. The Academy runs from January through May and includes a combination of online distance learning modules and face-to-face workshops to assist participants in developing watershed management skills. All four of the scholarship winners are watershed resource professionals working in the watershed.

Those individuals are:

- Zach Holsinger, LaGrange County Surveyor
- Carolyn Grace, St. Joseph County (MI) Conservation District Administrator
- Kristen Thomas, City of Angola MS4 Coordinator
- Joe Parman, Van Buren County Drain Commissioner

St. Joseph River Watershed Facts

- 4,685 square miles are drained by the river
- 3rd largest watershed draining to Lake Michigan
- 2 states – Indiana and Michigan – share the watershed
- 15 counties are entirely or partially within the watershed
- 1,527,992 people live in the watershed (2010 Census)
- 210 miles – length of the main branch of the river
- 1,631 miles – length of significant tributaries to the river
- 70% of the watershed is used for crop/animal production
- 50% of the historic wetlands in the watershed have been lost
- 04050001 – St. Joseph River Watershed Hydrologic Unit (HUC)
- 2 times - the main branch crosses the IN/MI state line



Creature Feature: Lampreys

Lampreys get a bad reputation because of the invasive sea lampreys that have wreaked havoc in the Great Lakes. Native lampreys in the St. Joseph River Watershed are an important part of our stream ecosystems. The watershed has four documented species of native lampreys: the chestnut, silver, American brook, and northern brook lampreys. The chestnut and silver lamprey are parasitic and attach to other fish with their suction cup mouths. The brook lampreys, on the other hand, do not form large suction cups and are non-parasitic. All the native lamprey species are sensitive to pollution and habitat disturbance, making them important indicators of a healthy stream. And good news! They are abundant in the watershed.

With all the lampreys swimming around in our local waterways, should we be concerned about lampreys sticking to us? **Absolutely not! They do not like how people taste!**



Larval lampreys collected from Turkey Creek, south of Goshen, in 2018

Riley Dam Rehab Complete

The Village of Union City lies just upstream of Union Lake, which is the first major impoundment of the St. Joseph River. Union Lake wouldn't exist without the Riley Dam and on November 2, 2018, the Village achieved a long-standing goal of rehabilitating the Dam. The \$630,000 project reshaped the earthen embankment and added a drainage system. The Riley Dam was built in 1923 and named after Halbert F. Riley, who donated the land to the Village. It delivers up to 418 Kw of power. Originally, that was more than the Village of Union City needed, but today that is about 25% of the Village's power needs.

While it has stood for 95 years, was designed very well for the time, and has served Union City well, the earthen embankment was not designed to modern standards. Over the years, the steep slopes of the embankment have led to irregular mowing. The result was overgrown root structures, causing the earthen embankment to weaken over time. Adding to the problem, the growth at the base of the dam created insufficient drainage, causing the earthen embankment itself to retain water and weaken. The combination of a waterlogged embankment with steep slopes caused alarm about the long-term survival of the dam and prohibited the Village from insuring the structure.

The rehabilitation project kicked off on September 4, 2018 and involved lowering the lake by approximately 7 feet so that work could be completed on both sides of the embankment. The lowering of the lake led to a few challenges, as it exposed several thousand stumps – some with sharp spears extending several feet above the lowered water surface. It also caused several water wells in the area to go dry.



However, the Village provided clean drinking water to those in need and neighbors with deeper wells also pitched in. The Union Lake Association addressed the stump issue, funding the lowering of over 1,000 stumps to increase the safety for both people and recreational equipment utilizing the lake.

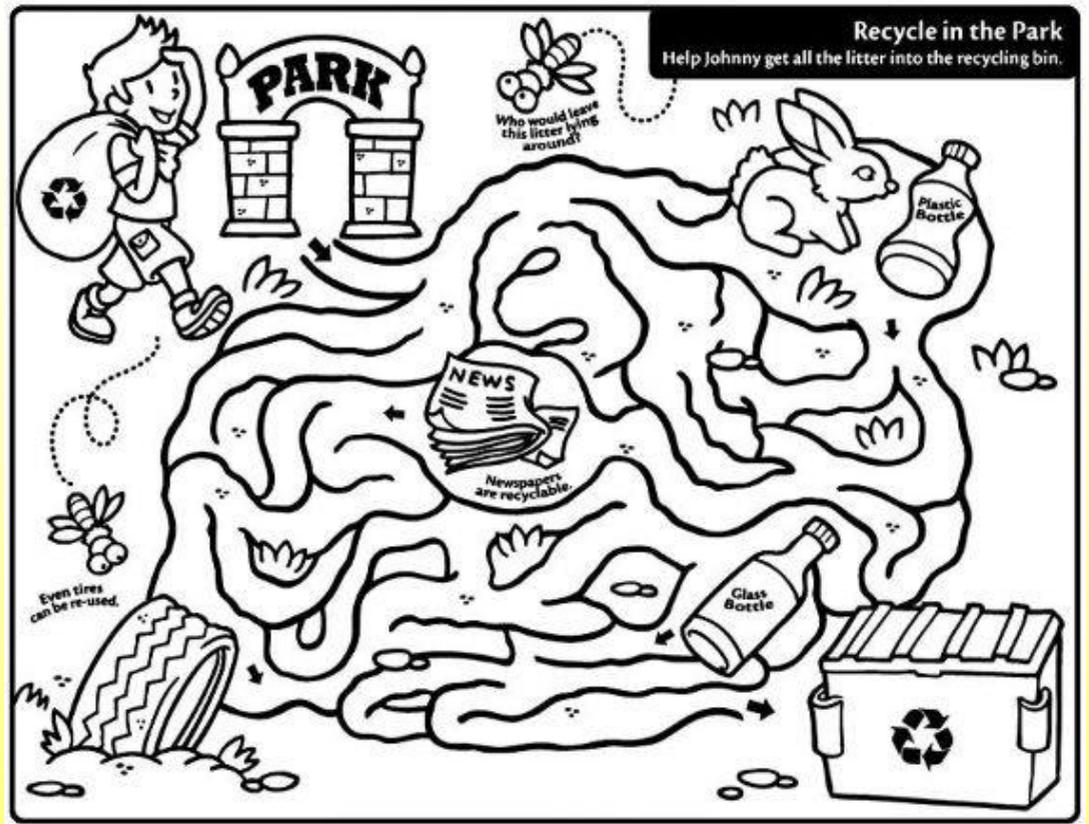
Overall, the project ran smoothly, finishing nearly a month ahead of schedule and coming in well below the initial estimates of nearly \$1 million. The new earthen embankment, drainage system, and lowered stumps have greatly improved the safety and longevity of Riley Dam and Union Lake.

Kids' Corner



The 3 R's – **reducing**, **reusing**, and **recycling** – can help you, your community, and the environment by saving money, energy, and natural resources.

Recycling programs are managed at the state and local level. These all help to cut down on the amount of waste we throw away. They conserve natural resources, landfill space, and energy.



Friends of the St. Joseph River
 P.O. Box 1794
 South Bend IN 46634



Langley Covered Bridge, north of Centreville, MI.
 Photo by Joshua S. Goodrich