Friends of the White River

Spring 2004 Issue #2

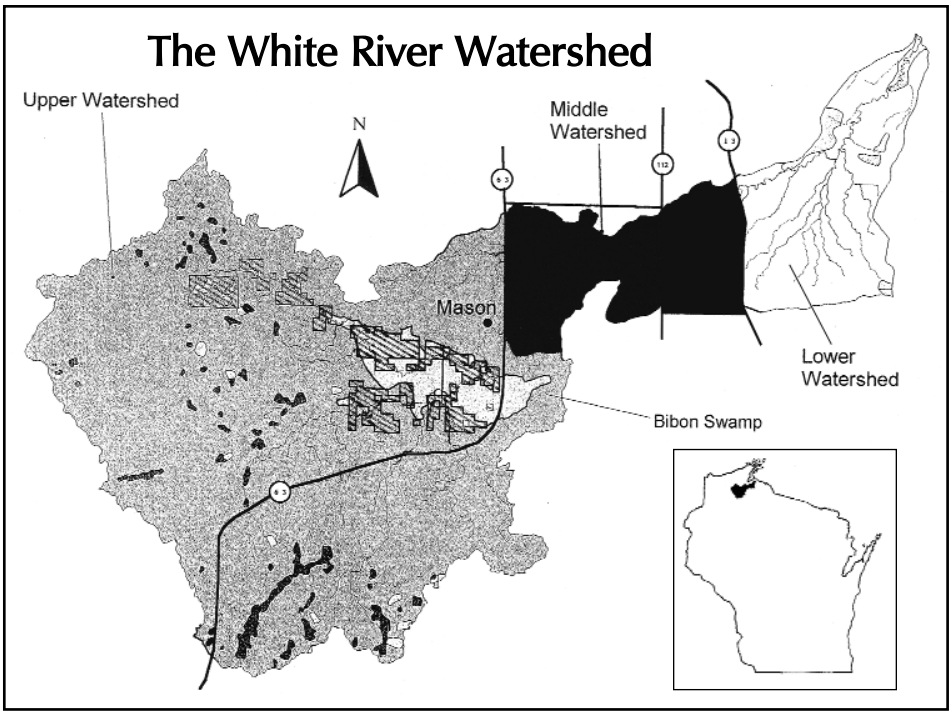
April 17 Meeting Seeks Final Input on Watershed Plan

A public meeting April 17 will offer those interested in the White River a chance to examine or contribute input to the White River watershed management plan currently being produced on behalf of the Friends of the White River.

The meeting will be held from 10:00 a.m. until noon at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center on Highway 2 east of Ashland.

Development of the plan, along with a series of public meetings earlier this year, has been made possible through a Wisconsin DNR River Protection grant awarded last year to the local Wild Rivers chapter of Trout Unlimited and in support of the Friends of the White River. The plan focuses on the "middle segment" of the White RIver watershed—that area of the watershed bounded by Highway 63 on the west and Highway 13 on the east.

The management plan identifies the landscape characteristics of the watershed, outlines the goals and objectives of the Friends of the White River group, and suggests specific activities that might be taken to achieve these goals. The plan is not a legal or enforceable document, but rather a suggested set of guidelines and activities that private landowners might use to help translate their concerns about the White River into actions. In addition, the plan will aid the Friends group in the developing future projects and applying for grant funding.



Likewise, the Friends of the White River not a government organization, but is composed entirely of White River landowners and river users who began meeting informally a couple of years ago to discuss specific actions that might be taken to preserve the ecological health and scenic beauty of this middle segment of the river corridor.

In order to bolster their resources, the Friends group last year approached the Bad River Watershed Association, a volunteer, nonprofit organization formed in 2002 that works to promote the ecological health of the Bad River watershed—which includes the watershed of the White River, among several other rivers. The Friends group proposed becoming part of the BRWA; the BRWA board of directors agreed and last year established the Friends of the White River as a permanent committee.

Membership in the Friends of the White River is open to any interested citizen. Membership in the Bad River Watershed Association is automatically extended to all residents and landowners of the Bad River watershed.

Consider attending the April 17 meeting to learn more or to add your ideas to the future management of the White River watershed.

The White River and its watershed are part of the larger Bad River Watershed, which encompasses 675,000 acres of land in Bayfield, Ashland, and Iron counties, draining the White, Marengo, Brunsweiler, and Potato rivers and Bear Trap and Tyler Forks creeks—all the waters that flow into the Bad River and then into Lake Superior. The Friends of the White River is a committee of the Bad River Watershed Association, Inc. The mission of the Bad River Watershed Association is to promote the healthy interconnection between the human and natural communities of the watershed by involving all citizens in maintaining the integrity of watershed systems for future generations.

BAD RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION
310 Stuntz Avenue, #301
Ashland, WI 54806

White River Watershed Management Plan Highlights

The White River watershed management plan, currently under development, seeks to develop a vision for the White River watershed and outline strategies that might lead to the fulfillment of that vision.

The draft plan is open to public review and input at an open meeting of the Friends of the White River from 10:00 a.m. until noon on Saturday, April 17 at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center.

The plan features background information on the White River watershed, including an outline of significant natural features, landscape characteristics, cultural history, current land use, development trends and a community profile.

In addition, the plan summarizes the results of a variety of regional surveys done over the past several years that have gathered landowners' and residents' opinions on the current condition of the area and hopes for the future.

The plan focuses on the "middle segment" of the White River watershed—that area bounded on the west by Highway 63 and on the east by Highway 13.

As a navigable waterway, the White River itself is considered a resource that is owned by and available to all citizens of the state of Wisconsin. The segments of the White River watershed above and below this "middle segment" comprise a patchwork of federal, state and tribal land that

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White River Watershed Management Plan Draft Goals and Objectives

Goal: *To protect and preserve the White River between Highway 63 (Bayfield County) and Highway 13 (Ashland County) as a natural corridor for future generations to enjoy.*

Objective #1: Research and maintain or improve water quality.

Status/Opportunities: The Bad River Watershed Association, of which the Friends of the White River is a part, currently conducts water-quality testing at various locations around the Bad River watershed. The program might be expanded to including testing sites on the middle segment of the White River. Information gathered from this testing can establish a baseline of ecological health for that stretch of river, and from there projects might be designed to maintain or improve the water quality.

Objective #2: Research and maintain or improve fishery.

Status/Opportunities: A great deal of research has been conducted in the upper part of the White River watershed through the Bibon Swamp. However, almost no fishery studies have been done for the stretch of the river between Hwys 63 and 13. In cooperation with Trout Unlimited, the Wisconsin DNR, and other organizations, the Friends of the White River might seek funding to support basic research on the status and health of the fishery in this river segment.

Objective #3: Provide walk-in public access to the river.

Status/Opportunities: Between the Maple Ridge Road river crossing near Highway 63 and the boat landing at the White River Flowage on Highway 112, boaters or anglers cannot legally set foot on the shore of the White River, a situation that currently limits public use of this lengthy river segment. A landowner in the Town of Kelly has expressed interest in establishing a public easement on their land that would allow river users to walk to and from the river, and along a small segment of the river shoreline.

Objective #4: Encourage ecological preservation/restoration in order to protect the scenic beauty and ecological health of the river corridor.

Status/Opportunity: Private landowners who want to preserve their land's natural beauty and ecological health have various options and tools at their disposal. Some landowners may wish to sell or donate land or easements to land-trust organizations. Other landowners may explore using conservation easements to protect their land's beauty and ecological health while they retain ownership and control of their land. Two landowners in the Town of Kelly have expressed interest in selling some of their land to an entity that would provide that sort of protection. The Friends of the White River group is investigating grants and other funding sources to enable purchase of that land, and a regional private land trust, the Bayfield Regional Conservancy, has expressed interest in holding title to the land. The Friends group and BRC also may work to educate other White River landowners who are interested in learning about easement. In addition, the Ashland-Bayfield-Douglas-Iron County Land Conservation Department and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have expressed interest in working with White River landowners who want to explore land conservation options available through county and federal government programs.

Land Trusts Provide Flexible Conservation Tool

A 2002 survey of landowners by the Bad River Watershed Association revealed that within the White River watershed, nearly 60 percent of respondents have lived on or owned land there for more than 30 years.

That's a remarkable number, considering the highly mobile nature of our society. But it bodes well for the land, because people who live on a piece of land for many years—or many generations—tend to know that land well, understand its characteristics and unique features, and provide good stewardship to it.

Many landowners who develop close ties to their land also care deeply about its future. Land trusts offer tools with which landowners can design and guarantee long-term protection strategies for the land they love.

The land trust movement is one of the fastest growing conservation movements in the country. Currently there are more than 1,200 local and regional land trusts nationwide, protecting more than 20 million acres in all 50 states. In Wisconsin there are more than 50 local, regional and statewide land trusts that collectively protect about 100,000 acres.

Land trusts are not "trusts" in the legal sense, and may also be called "conservancies," "foundations," or other names. They are distinguished by their first-hand involvement in land transactions or management.

This involvement can take many forms. Some land trusts purchase or accept donations of land or of conservation easements. Some manage land owned by others or advise landowners on how to preserve their land. Some land trusts help negotiate conservation transactions in which they play no other role. They may work with other nonprofit organizations and sometimes with developers. A land trust may do one, several or all of these things, but its focus is meeting a landowner's conservation and financial needs.

Advantages of Land Trusts

Land trusts have many advantages as a vehicle for protecting land. As private organizations, land trusts can be more flexible and creative and can generally act more quickly than government agencies, since they are not restrained by politics and procedures. They are able to negotiate with landowners discreetly, confidentially and quickly.

A land trust's nonprofit status brings a variety of tax benefits. Donations of land or easements to land trusts may provide the donor with various tax savings. Properly structured land trusts are exempt from federal and state income taxes, and sometimes from local property and real estate transfer taxes as well. Nonprofit status is also an advantage in raising funds from a variety of sources.

Conservation Easements

Most landowners are interested in retaining ownership of their land, but would like to see it protected in some way after they are gone. In this case, a conservation easement is the best tool.

A conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a private land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values.

Conservation easements are customized to each property. A land trust will work closely with the landowner to draft a document that reflects the landowner's vision for the future of the property. The landowner decides what to protect the land for, and what to protect it against. Many easements have restrictions on sub-division or additional residential units, while other easements retain building sites where they do not impair the land's conservation values.

The creation of conservation easements offers a landowner many benefits:

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Management Plan Highlights

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enjoy a level of study, scrutiny and ecological protection not available to private land.

By contrast, the "middle segment" of the watershed is composed of entirely privately owned land, where ecological protection depends on county and township land-use plans, zoning ordinances, and the awareness and action of private landowners.

Currently, most land parcels in watershed's middle segment are large and are owned by relatively few landowners, and the river corridor has retained a high level of ecological quality and a distinct wilderness character. However, regional land prices are escalating, the demand for riverfront property is rising, and land-parcel subdivision and development are rapidly moving northward. White River landowners are facing increasing pressure to subdivide or sell their land. The well-documented history of Wisconsin lakeshore development trends shows that shoreland subdivision leads to increased development, which is often accompanied by a degradation of scenic beauty and ecological health.

Facing this possible future scenario, a group of watershed landowners calling themselves the Friends of the White River began to discuss more deliberate ways to preserve this middle section of the river's exceptional quality for future generations.

The management plan outlines this goal and includes various activities that might be taken to achieve it.

Friends of the White River
a program of the
BAD RIVER WATERSHED ASSOCIATION
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Land Trusts

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Great flexibility: the landowner decides what to protect and how best to protect it.

Continued ownership: conservation easements allow landowners to continue to own and use their land and sell it or pass it on to their heirs.

Continued protection: future owners of the land are bound to all the terms of the easement. The land trust is responsible for enforcing these terms.

Financial benefit: Landowners may realize a number of financial benefits by placing land in conservation easements.

Land Trust Resources

Bayfield Regional Conservancy

The Bayfield Regional Conservancy was named Wisconsin's Land Trust of the Year for 2003. Headquartered in Bayfield, Wis., BRC works regionally throughout Bayfield, Ashland, Douglas and Sawyer Counties.

The BRC has worked to educate and advise Friends of the White River on land conservation issues, and also is available to any White River watershed landowner interested in learning more about land trust conservation options for their land.

Contact BRC at (715) 779-5263 or on the web at www.brland.org.

Incorporated in 1994, Gathering Waters Conservancy is a Wisconsin statewide organization dedicated to educating the public and landowners about conservation options for private land.

Contact GWC at (608) 251-9131 or on the web at www.gathering-waters.org

GATHERING WATERS CONSERVANCY