

Time is right for the Kankakee

It takes a lot to impress the man in charge of the 55-county watershed which more than 90 percent of Illinoisans' call home.

Yet Lt. Gov. Bob Kustra spoke with admiration Wednesday of "the beauty and wildness of the Kankakee River" after a brief trip downstream through the Womence Wetlands.

More importantly perhaps, he helped efforts to impress federal, state and local officials whose support is vital for funding river projects here.

Top brass from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources are already talking about "significant funds" for river projects being awarded next month to the Kankakee River Local Partnership Council.

That group has requested nearly \$2 million for 33 watershed projects. It's competing with 22 or 23 other groups across the state for just \$3.5 million in Conservation 2000 funds.

"No one expects 100 percent," says J. R. Black who heads the local partnership. But he refuses to rule out 99 percent.

Top DNR brass Wednesday smiled knowingly when they publically promise "significant funds" sometime next month for river projects. No one will put dollars to the smiles; coyly awaiting the final word from DNR Chief Brent Manning and Gov. Jim Edgar.

Yet critics contend that even the entire \$3.5 million wouldn't solve the problems of the river much less the watershed.

Right! So what?

Mindset, not money, is what really is at stake in this high-stakes game of political timing.

Kustra touched on it when he spoke of "a resurgence of interest in rivers everywhere you want to look across Illinois."

River issues are grabbing headlines and the attention of politicians like never before.

Public pressure moves politics and projects.

Always has.

Always will.

Decades of work — often decades of frustration — by a handful of people has finally paid dividends with greater environmental awareness and a new willingness by old foes to work for common cause.

Money will come to the Kankakee because work is needed and because agencies need the work.

The Corps of Engineers, after decades as the nation's dam and dredge darling, now desperately tries to wrap itself in the mantle of protectors of the environment.

Ironically the same things they learned "improving" river systems in the name of navigation may prove valuable in river restoration.

The Kankakee is an important example of the new Corps' ability to solve bi-state problems, an example they desperately want to use as a national example.

Spicing up the pot are the staffers of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service seeking to carve their own niche with a proposed 33,000 acre Grand Kankakee Marsh National Wildlife Refuge.

It is no coincidence that USF&W dreams of a federal refuge for the agency

not far removed from the U.S. Forest Service's developing showcase at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie near Wilmington.

Both USF&W and the Corps see opportunities along the river, not the least of which is establishing their own "turf" in a major focal area of the Midwest.

With Congress increasingly tightening purse strings and threatening to downsize federal agencies, projects like the Kankakee River figure prominently in economic survival of the West.

Illinois also sees opportunities to get more bang for the C2000 buck by cost sharing work now with the Corps.

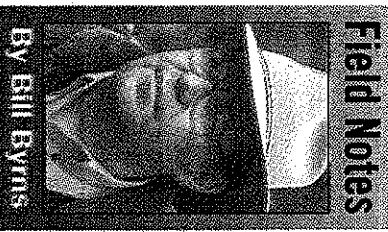
And so money and work will begin for two very good reasons: it's the right thing to do and the right time to do it — reasons that mean vastly different things to vastly different groups.

The best hope for the Kankakee watershed is that at long last a true grassroots coalition exists and has shown it can work past individual agendas.

Never before have Kankakee, Iroquois and Will county representatives sat down at the same table with agriculture interests, environmentalists, businessmen and planners to talk about the watershed in tandem with state and federal officials.

Opportunity, money and people are all in the right place at the right time. Wednesday gave agency people and political leaders a chance to test the temperament of the public winds.

Hopefully those are winds of change.



Field Notes

By Bill Byrns



Journal/Bill Byrns

Deceptively tranquil, this old channel of the Kankakee River near the state line has proven to be a deathtrap for at least two unwary people. Debris blocking the channel has forced the river southward into a new meandering route.