Paddle opens eyes to river issues

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By Carrie Michael/Gazette Staff

FORT ATKINSON--To know the river is to paddle it.

With a few companions in the canoe, one almost gets hypnotized in the quiet stretches by the soft kerplunk of a paddle dipping into the water, like an arm of a swimmer.

A maze of colors--the light blue sky and the dark greens from overhanging trees--reflects on the water.

Fluffy cottonwood seeds and helicopter seeds from maple trees float on the surface.

The dual motion of a paddler's own volition and the current carries the boats past tracts of trees with submerged trunks in the shoreline.

About 25 people came to Fort Atkinson on Saturday afternoon to learn more about the Rock River.

Participants gleaned insight from canoeing, then conversing with experts and legislators.

An outdoor town hall meeting kicked off the event, sponsored by the Rock River Coalition, state Department of Natural Resources and UW Extension.

Residents posed most questions to state Rep. David Ward, R-Fort Atkinson, a dairy farmer.

He shared one measure on its way to the state

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Assembly, a bill that would approve a breakwater project downriver on Lake Koshkonong.

The 4,000-acre lake, the seventh largest in the state, is vulnerable to shoreline erosion. Wind across the lake whips up quite a chop. Likewise, many natural wetlands that once buffered the area are gone.

One solution, posed by leaders with the Rock Koshkonong Lake District, is building berms to protect the shoreline inside bays and allow the banks to return to wetland plants.

Underwater gates would let slow-moving boats through but keep carp out of the bays. Carp eat vegetation and tend to stir up the bottom, clouding the water and prohibiting plant growth.

The project, estimated at $2.4 million, is undergoing a feasibility study by the Army Corps of Engineers. If approved, the agency would fund 65 percent of the project.

The rest of the money could come from the lake district's tax base, DNR grants, private donations or other sources, said Frank Micale, Rock Koshkonong Lake District commissioner.

Work on any shoreline needs state approval, Ward said. The joint finance committee approved the project proposal, 16-0, in the current state budget process.

"It's not a Republican or Democrat issue. We've got good bipartisan support. I'll be keeping an eye on it," Ward said of the bill.

Lake Koshkonong's size alleviates some conflicts with water use, Micale said. Usually everyone has room.

Things work conversely on the river. The Fort Atkinson City Council recently voted to make the entire stretch of the Rock River inside city limits slow/no wake.

Councilman Bill Camplin, owner of Cafe Carpe in Fort Atkinson, wasn't on the council at the time of the vote but said the drive primarily came from homeowners complaining about shoreline erosion. People ignore temporary slow/no-wake orders when water is high.

Complaints about the racket from personal

watercrafts were another key factor.

Mike Cross, DNR conservation warden in southern Jefferson County, said the only other stretch of permanent slow/no wake on the river is in Newville. There the purpose is for safety. It slows traffic on a congested waterway at the base of the lake with boat launches spewing out everything from canoes to speed boats.

Part of the 6.5-mile canoe trip through Fort Atkinson included a stop at the Bark River Fish Hatchery.

Don Bush, DNR senior fisheries biologist, said carp hatch their eggs primarily in mill ponds near dams. Winning the battle against carp includes returning the mill ponds to natural stream habitat.

A stocking influx of panfish, such as bluegills, eat baby carp, reducing their numbers.

Carp cause more damage than motor boats on Lake Koshkonong, Bush said.

The momentary disturbance of a propeller has a smaller impact than 365 days of carp activity on the lake bottom.

"Siltation from farmlands," he added, "has a greater impact on individual fish populations than motor boat traffic," he added.

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