

## Alabama's Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership: Communities Coalesce in Cleanup Effort

A historic alliance of Jefferson County and the cities along Alabama's Five Mile Creek set in motion an ambitious plan to clean up and revitalize a waterway that once had the reputation of being "the most polluted stream" in the state. In fact, local residents named it "Creosote Creek" because of the smell of chemicals emanating from the Black Warrior River tributary. A master plan for the waterway envisions a 25-mile greenway along the creek's banks suitable for biking, hiking, fishing and canoeing that will serve as a magnet for ecotourism, as well as new capital investments in adjacent communities.

Five Mile Creek is one of the few streams in the state not suitable for fishing and swimming, under federal guidelines. The presence of creosote, a brownish oily liquid consisting chiefly of aromatic hydrocarbons produced by the distillation of coal tar, has been a major impediment to the revitalization of Five Mile Creek. Another redevelopment deterrent is dead fish littering the waterway, a consequence of cyanide and other industrial toxins routinely discharged into the creek.

Cleaning up the waterway posed some seemingly insurmountable challenges. The first was forging the necessary alliances to formulate a plan. The cities and towns along Five Mile Creek were considered unlikely partners for such an alliance. Many of them have higher-than-average poverty and unemployment rates, and budgets that don't include planners or even park renovations.

To the surprise of many observers, all of the north Jefferson County towns along the creek have formed a partnership to collaborate on the cleanup and redevelopment of a 25-mile stretch of adjacent land. The principal facilitator of this partnership was the Black Warrior-Cahaba Rivers Land Trust organization established to implement the Jefferson County Greenways project, a \$30 million land acquisition program designed to protect riparian corridors along area rivers and streams.

The Land Trust signed a Memorandum of Agreement with six municipalities—Birmingham, Center Point, Tarrant, Fultondale, Brookside, Graysville—and other organizations to establish a greenway and parks system along the Five Mile Creek stream. The Land Trust owns approximately 600 acres of land within this watershed and, with its partners, is pursuing additional acquisitions. Specifically, the coalition aims to improve and enhance water quality, improve the physical health of area residents, and provide recreational amenities in economically challenged communities.

An editorial in the Birmingham News applauded the partnership, stating, "These are not towns with deep pockets in search of a project to eat up a budget surplus. They are small towns whose leaders simply want to build a legacy for future generations."

Yet, despite the advantage of an attractive location with presumably good redevelopment potential, the presence or potential presence of hazardous substances or pollutants from industrial and mining activities and concomitant liability issues have stymied the land acquisition initiative and thereby stalled the redevelopment plan. Site assessments are indicated when properties intended for public use may contain hazardous environmental constituents.

An EPA Brownfields grant provided funding for Phase I and Phase II assessments on selected sites in the greenway project. Final selections will be made with community input to determine site eligibility, impact on water quality, economic redevelopment potential, recreational value, and overall contribution to development of the greenway.

Meanwhile, the Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership got a head start on its cleanup effort. In the town of Brookside, the coalition recruited some 200 volunteers and 15 sponsors in the first ever community cleanup of the waterway. The volunteers pulled 14 tons of debris from the creek, much of which was deposited by a flood in 2003.

Fortified with a \$200,000 EPA Assessment Grant and an enthusiastic corps of volunteers, the Partnership envisions walkable and livable communities with new job and investment opportunities along Five Mile Creek in the not too distant future.

“Thanks to those who chose to look beyond its polluted shores, Five Mile Creek has a bright new future as a community asset,” said Wendy Allen Jackson, executive director of the Black Warrior- Cahaba Rivers Land Trust.

The Five Mile Creek Greenway Partnership was awarded the “2004 Partnership Project of the Year Award” from the Board of Directors for the Black Warrior – Cahaba Rivers Land Trust. The project was recognized for looking beyond the creek’s bad reputation and seeking ways to improve water quality and their communities through the development of a network of parks and greenways along its shores.

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