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Teams working to improve Opequon Studies show that residents believe environment there is in decline

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MARTINSBURG - When Alana Hartman's team went out to collect litter from the Opequon Creek watershed, they didn't just grab gloves and trashbags, they got out their canoes too, she said. Hartman said that she has gone on two canoe trips with the recently formed Opequon Creek Project Team to help pick up litter in the creek. The garbage was one of the top problems that neighbors told her group about when they questioned them on their perceptions of environmental quality there, she said. Other surveys on water quality in the area had similar findings, she said. "People say, 'That's a dirty creek. It has a lot of trash in it,'" Hartman said. "It reduces the value of the creek in the public eye." She's hoping that the studies will help solve this, and other problems.

The community along the Opequon Creek has also complained about open dumping sights where trash is regularly left. Other problems included the odor of sewage along the water, especially after rainfalls, Hartman said.

The problems were similar to those found in another recent study, Hartman said. Over the summer, the Davis College of Agriculture, Forestry and Consumer Sciences at West Virginia University distributed questionnaires to residents along the creek. They wanted to determine how residents of both West Virginia and Virginia use the waterway and how each perceive the environment there, said Gerard E. D'Souza professor of Agriculture and Resource Economics. The survey also included questions about proposed cleanup projects for the waterway.

The survey was part of an effort to study water in the mid-Atlantic region, D'Souza said. Several universities are working together to examine the Opequon and

other waterways. Researchers at Virginia Tech are working to establish maximum daily guidelines for pollutants that flow into the river, which starts in Virginia and then flows North through West Virginia and into the Potomac River. Those guidelines should be in place by late 2006, D'Souza said. But before they can be established, officials needed West Virginia's help in determining the financial benefits of cleaning up the water.

"One of the questions Virginia Tech was confronted with was: What are the benefits to communities with cleaner water? They looked to us," D'Souza explained. He said that his team of economics related researchers found that 75 percent of the respondents believed environmental problems along the creek are on the rise. They cited garbage as their number one concern. Groups like the one Hartman leads are already working to tackle that problem, D'Souza said.

"Even as we speak there is a group in West Virginia that is organized by the Department of Environmental Protection that conducts periodic cleanups," he said. Other groups along the Virginia side of the creek do similar work, he said.

A complete cleanup of the waterway, which was recently identified as a high priority for the West Virginia Chesapeake Bay Watershed, could be several years away though. D'Souza said he believes it will take at least 5 to 10 years to complete the river's cleanup.

Part of the problem could be the financial contributions that residents are willing to make. In D'Souza's study, researchers asked participants how much they would be willing to contribute to help clean up the waterway. Respondents from West Virginia said that they would willingly pay a fee of \$25 a year over a five year period. Residents along the Virginia side of the creek said that they would be willing to pay \$50 a year, reports show. D'Souza said that this would not be enough to fully fund a clean up effort. Local dollars and multi-agency co-operation would also be required, he said.

Other kinks in the plan could include the five-year timetable, Hartman said. "That's a good amount of time that people can get their minds around, but it's likely going to take a lot longer than that," she said.

Once the cleanup is finished though, residents will likely see economic benefits, D'Souza said. If residents were able to swim in the creek and have better fishing opportunities there, more money might come into the local communities. "Given the proximity of that area to some of the high population parts of the country, recreation certainly could have a lot of economic development impact," D'Souza said.

The study showed that at the present time, the West Virginia side of the creek sees more activity.

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