

New Albany's diamond in the rough — Loop Island

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Staff photos by Daniel Suddeath

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— A short drive from the concrete jungle of downtown Louisville sits 47 acres of wetlands, nestled by the banks of the Ohio River.

A walking guide map tells of aquatic plants, wading birds and a railroad bridge constructed in 1870 — but this hidden treasure holds secrets and history that the naked eye can't observe.

"Somewhere down here is Henry Clay's bullet," said Al Goodman, an environmental consultant and owner of the Loop Island Wetlands and the former Moser Tannery, which sits on the adjacent property at 2200 E. Main St. in New Albany.

The site is priority No. 1 for New Albany's remaining portion of the Ohio River Greenway, as the plan is to connect the wetlands to the path via a pedestrian bridge.

On this sun-kissed yet cool spring morning, Goodman takes time to stop on what is known as the Dueling Grounds to provide a history lesson.

It was there in 1809 where Clay — a former Kentucky statesman and U.S. congressman — dueled with his Kentucky General Assembly counterpart, Humphrey Marshall, over the types of suits Commonwealth legislators should wear.

Clay wanted homemade, American clothes instead of British duds — Marshall opposed the idea.

The saga led to the two coming across the Ohio River to Indiana, where dueling was still legal in Floyd County. After stepping off 30 paces, they fired at each other and missed.

They repeated the shootout twice more, with each being grazed by at least one bullet, though no major injuries occurred. Doctors called the duel after the third round.

That's just part of the history of the wetlands area that most Floyd County residents don't know about, Goodman said. And he has a plan: Goodman wants to incorporate the tannery buildings into a multiuse facility equipped with condominiums and a museum that would pay heritage to New Albany's leather-producing past.

At one time, New Albany had five leather operations.

"It's an opportunity for New Albany to have the first tannery museum in the United States," Goodman said. Not to mention what it could do for that area of New Albany.

Goodman believes retail could explode in the area with a development — businesses could feed off the Greenway as well as the added housing. He compares what the neighborhood could be to Bardstown Road in Louisville.

"We'd really like to see a change in this area of town," Goodman said. Michael Ladd, executive director of the New Albany Urban Enterprise Zone Association, has worked for nearly two years with Goodman on various concepts for the Moser Tannery.

He agrees with Goodman's vision.

"I think the most reasonable [idea] is a residential area. I think that if such a development were to take place, it would spark commercial and retail growth in that immediate area," Ladd said.

He continued that when the city put in sidewalks, removed a railroad bump and paved streets in the area, residents started sprucing up their yards and fixing their homes.

Ladd dubs the possibilities as a potential "bridge effect" — meaning the space between improvements that occur at two separate, distant areas also would benefit.

"If there were to be an improvement at the [Moser] Tannery, and somehow this improvement were linked to what is happening downtown, the area in between would see improvements as well," Ladd said.

"You would also see benefit between the [Moser] Tannery and up to Spring Street, as well as the surrounding area."

But as with many ideas, money becomes the ultimate factor. Goodman said he's pitched the idea to several interested developers, but the economic downturn scared investors.

And Goodman is left flipping the bill for the property, something he said he can't continue to do.

"I would hate to see the whole concept die because of the need to have some assistance with the development," Goodman said.

His dream has been growing for sometime. Goodman started working for the tannery as an environmental consultant in 1986, and began envisioning its future well before he purchased the land and buildings in 2002.

The ponds and property are environmentally safe, Goodman said. And the selling points for a development are obvious: It's a 15-minute drive from downtown Louisville, several funding sources are available because of the property's historical significance and then there's the view — 47 acres of green space between the flood levy and the Ohio River that would serve as a personal park for potential condo residents.

Goodman said people are shocked to realize how much space is really there. His first order of business after purchasing the land was to tear down the fences that kept people away from the wetlands.

That property is now open to the public — something else Goodman said many people don't know.

Anyone can walk through the wetlands at their own risk — there's a map posted on the window of one of the tannery buildings that outlines the best course to take.

People can tour the site for free, but Goodman fears that if he has to sell the land to a developer without the same vision for the property, the wetlands could again be fenced off.

For now, Goodman will continue to pursue investors and work with the Greenway Commission on the extension of the path. He hopes someday, the plans that have been limited to just words can come to fruition.

"What we have here is a story that tells some of the legacy of New Albany," Goodman said.

ON THE WEB

- To learn more about the Loop Island Wetlands, visit the Web site www.loopislandwetlands.com

SO YOU KNOW

- Loop Island is a federally-designated wetlands area.

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