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Morris Richardson II / The Detroit News

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials Harry Salisbury, right, and Scott Parker, left, inspect the shoreline in southwest Detroit with John Jamian, second from right, and John Strocker of the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority.

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Detroit shore to be restored

Riverbank, Belle Isle cleanup plans aided by federal money

By Jeremy Pearce / *The Detroit News*

DETROIT -- A flood of federal money will soon reach the Detroit River, as local officials attempt to improve the city's vital but neglected waterway.

This month, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is anticipating \$528,000 to ease navigation for commercial ships, reinforce river walls and stem shore erosion at Belle Isle.

Corps officials, usually engaged in dredging the 32-mile-long Detroit River, are now planning river restoration projects, believed to be the first in more than a decade.

"We want to see a better waterfront that will bring more people downtown," said Scott Parker, a Corps deputy project manager. "We also want to see better management of this river."

Three of seven proposed projects focus on Belle Isle, the city property most affected by river flows. Engineers in recent years have become concerned about erosion on the island's south and northwest shorelines. All told, \$188,000 has been earmarked for shore protection, fish habitat and a master plan for the island.

Other projects address Detroit's shores and a planned river

Detroit River projects

River improvement plans spearheaded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers include:

Greenways master plan: \$100,000

Belle Isle master plan: \$100,000

Seawall study: \$100,000
Chicken Bone Reef study: \$100,000

Shore protection: \$80,000

Belle Isle fish habitat: \$48,000

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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walk promoted by grass-roots groups since at least the 1980s. City planners have discussed an unbroken recreational path to connect Fort Wayne and Belle Isle, but have lacked the money to achieve it. Corps money will bring \$100,000 to help create such a plan.

Detroit has fashioned a \$7.8-million, 3,000-foot riverfront promenade at Hart Plaza, and there are plans for expansion.

"You look at Denver, Cleveland or at Washington, D.C., and their waterfronts," said John Hartig, a U.S. Department of Transportation employee. In 1998, Hartig was appointed the first "Detroit River navigator," a position created to promote riverfront redevelopment.

"We have to do more. There are huge economic dividends to be gained from this river - from tourism, fishing, hunting and recreation."

Another proposal would evaluate the condition of Detroit River walls, some of which are crumbling into the current. The subject holds special interest for port officials and shippers because solid walls are needed to safely unload passengers and cargo.

Detroit Port Authority Director John Jamian said this year's river tonnage has been "significantly lower" than last year, due in part to a sluggish national economy. He fears lower Great Lakes waters and damage to sea walls will only make commerce more difficult.

"You look over to Windsor and you see a very stable shoreline," Jamian said. "I've been amazed to see in what bad shape these walls are. Some of our sea walls date back to the late 1800s."

Finally, Corps experts intend to spend \$100,000 on a study of Chicken Bone Reef, a shallow river area just off Hart Plaza. The spot may be a natural buildup of sand, to be dredged to make way for larger vessels docking downtown.

Detroit environmental and river activists cheer the projects, while stressing the river's deeper environmental problems.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency scientists confirm that at least 30 sites of the Detroit River's bottom sediments remain severely polluted with lead, diesel fuel, zinc, cadmium and the farm pesticides DDT and toxophene. State or federal money to fully remove these risks to public health won't likely arrive soon.

"The problem is that there is absolutely no funding for a mess that big," said Jeanine Ansley, founder of Friends of the Detroit River, which has 400 members.

"This river has been forgotten. For the past five years, we've seen almost nothing happening here."

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