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Leaders to meet on the health of Detroit River

Preserving ecosystem is becoming a priority

December 15, 2001

BY DAN SHINE

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Top political leaders and environmentalists from the United States and Canada will meet in Wyandotte today to unveil a conservation vision seen as a major step in protecting and restoring the lower Detroit River ecosystem over the next decade.

It calls for protecting the remaining wetlands and marshes along the river and rehabilitating ones that have been harmed by industry or other development.

"It's a powerful statement that the two countries recognize the importance of protecting what we have left in the lower Detroit River," said Ken Schmidt, general manager of the Essex Region Conservation Authority and chairman of the Canadian Heritage River Initiative.

Schmidt said credit goes to U.S. Rep. John Dingell, who represents Downriver; Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Herb Gray; Member of Parliament Susan Whelan, and Peter Stroh, chairman of the Greater Detroit American Heritage River Initiative.

The four, along with political leaders from Downriver communities, Windsor and Ontario governments will be at today's session.

The vision statement reads, in part: "In 10 years the lower Detroit River ecosystem will be an

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international conservation region where the health and diversity of wildlife and fish are sustained through protection of existing significant habitats and rehabilitation of degraded ones, and where the resulting ecological, recreational, economic, educational, and 'quality of life' benefits are sustained for present and future generations."

To reach that goal, environmentalists say, the governments will have to aggressively protect from development the remaining marshes, islands and natural shorelines; restore areas harmed by development and pollution where possible; establish an international wildlife refuge, and create more public access and recreational and educational uses.

The two countries already have designated the Detroit River a heritage river -- the only one with the designation from both nations.

Creation of an international wildlife refuge would encourage private and public waterfront property owners to promote responsible management of the shoreline. Property owners could donate shoreline to the refuge effort or enter into an agreement for it to be managed by conservationists. The goal is to establish more wetlands for fish and birds.

"What this will do . . . is enhance Washington's and Ottawa's awareness of the river that we and Canada share," Stroh said Friday.

Dingell said: "This is about enhancing the quality of life in the Downrivers and in Canada."

One tangible thing Dingell hopes can be accomplished soon is the acquisition of the former Chrysler property in Trenton to prevent its development. He also said he would like to see Humbug Marsh and Island in Gibraltar bought back from a Detroit development company. *Today's session is to start at 10 a.m. at the Wyandotte Boat Club, 1 Pine St. To see a copy of the vision statement, go to www.semcog.org/mac/mac_ahr.html.*

Contact DAN SHINE at 313-223-4554 or dshine@freepress.com.

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