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## Deal would preserve Downriver shoreline

September 18, 2003

**BY DAN SHINE**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The long and contentious battle to preserve 400 acres of Detroit River wetlands and woodlands known as Humbug Marsh and Humbug Island appears close to being a done deal.

A judge in U.S. Bankruptcy Court filed papers rejecting the Chapter 11 reorganization plan of the developer, Made In Detroit, but approved a plan put forth by the Trust for Public Land that would permanently shield Humbug from development.

The plan calls for the trust to pay \$4.8 million to Made In Detroit's creditors to settle the bankruptcy case and get title to the land, which sits along the river in Gibraltar and Trenton.

Made In Detroit has 10 days to appeal. There was no answer Wednesday at the company's office.

Robert Gordon, an attorney representing the unpaid creditors, said Wednesday in a statement, "This decision brings a difficult situation to a conclusion."

But people Downriver who have worked to preserve Humbug aren't ready to pop champagne corks.

"This thing isn't over yet, but we're quite happy with what's going on," said Bruce Jones, a Grosse Ile Township conservationist who is one of many residents fighting to keep bulldozers off what he and others call the last undeveloped mile of Detroit River shoreline.

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Environmentalists and conservationists who objected to Made In Detroit's proposed development said the land is a valuable nesting spot for osprey and eagles, a spawning ground for walleye and yellow perch and a stopover for migratory water fowl and songbirds.

Made In Detroit countered that the land isn't that pristine -- parts had been used as a dumping ground -- and that the firm's plans would enhance, not detract, from the area.

The six-year fight included dozens of heated meetings attended by hundreds of people. Two mayoral recalls in Gibraltar centered around the Humbug issue, and candidates in other races won or lost largely depending on where they stood on Humbug. Made In Detroit, a group of local black businessmen, blamed racism, in part, for the opposition.

If Trust for Public Land becomes the owner of the property, it plans to turn it over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be included in the new Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge, an 18-mile stretch of the river from Zug Island to Sterling State Park in Monroe.

U.S. Rep. John Dingell, who created the refuge and has worked to preserve Humbug, has secured money in a refuge appropriations bill to repay the trust.

"We are very close to acquiring Humbug Marsh and Island -- 400 acres of prime wetlands habitat -- for inclusion into our refuge," Dingell said Wednesday in a statement. "This is something we've been trying to do for years. When we are successful -- and we will be -- the public will have access to a remarkable ecosystem in the heart of the Detroit River.

"We are all tremendously excited."

The Democrat from Dearborn said he hopes to make an official announcement that Humbug is part of the refuge on Sept. 27, at the start of a two-day celebration at Lake Erie Metropark, and Sept. 28 at Sterling State Park in Monroe. The celebration, which will be attended by Interior Secretary Gale Norton, marks the 100th year of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Eleven months ago, Made In Detroit filed for Chapter 11 reorganization a day before the acreage was to have been sold at a Wayne County Sheriff's Department foreclosure sale. The developer owed Standard Federal Bank and Bank One about \$3 million and had been in default on the loans since April 2001. It also owed unsecured creditors more than \$1 million.

The company borrowed the money to build a \$500-million development of 350 luxury homes -- including some on the island -- a marina, golf course, equestrian facilities and amphitheater.

But in September 1999, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Made In Detroit could not build on Humbug Island and land close to the Detroit River because of

Deal would preserve Downriver shoreline

the potential environmental impact, and the project eventually was scaled back to 300 homes and a nine-hole golf course. Construction never started.

For information on the refuge celebration, go to <http://midwest.fws.gov/DetroitRiver/>.

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