

City puts Mill Creek back on right path

BY ROBIN CORATHERS | GUEST COLUMNIST

Mayor Mark Mallory and Cincinnati City Council gave a wonderful Earth Day present to current and future residents, property owners, businesses and taxpayers by reaffirming the city's commitment to the Mill Creek Greenway Program, and by taking steps to reclaim the Mill Creek floodplain for public use and access. At stake are about 175 acres along 7 linear miles of Mill Creek in Cincinnati.

On April 19, City Council passed a resolution that contains provisions, recommended by Mill Creek Restoration Project, for the city to acquire permanent conservation easements on property owned by the Mill Creek Valley Conservancy District, the local sponsor of the historic Army Corps of Engineers flood damage reduction project.

For 35 years, the city ceded ownership and control of its valuable floodplain to the Conservancy District. Although the Corps provided a measure of flood protection in the city, it also caused tremendous environmental damage, bulldozing all the trees along the river, constructing a sterile, trapezoidal concrete channel in some river reaches, and building maintenance roads inside the river channel so that trucks can drive up and down Mill Creek. The net effect of this work was to contribute to blighted conditions in the river corridor.

Further, the Conservancy District managed the Mill Creek floodplain solely for the Corps channelization project, indiscriminately spraying herbicides to kill vegetation in and along the stream and erecting tall chain-link fences to prevent public access to the river.

All of this may have been acceptable three decades ago, but it isn't today. As a recent Wall Street Journal article states, "Increasingly, the nation's cities are viewing rivers as economic assets that will attract tourists and locals alike rather than as polluted, flood-prone liabilities."

Securing permanent legal control of the Conservancy District's property is vital to the success of the city's Mill Creek Greenway Program that can serve as a catalyst and vehicle for achieving multiple public objectives, including:

- Stimulating community development and economic revitalization within Mill Creek neighborhoods.
- Enhancing storm water management and floodplain storage capacity now, before the next flood, to reduce future losses to businesses and public infrastructure.
- Developing safe, off-road hike-and-bike trails and other amenities in the geographic center of the city.
- Creating a scenic river corridor, regenerating wildlife habitat and improving water quality, helping to implement the mayor's City Green Initiative.
- Reforesting the land along Mill Creek and celebrating the rich cultural history of the Underground Railroad and its connections to the Mill Creek Valley, by planting 10,000 Mill Creek Freedom Trees and installing cultural heritage signs.
- Retaining and attracting city residents and businesses and increasing property values.

Mill Creek is a small river with big problems and even bigger opportunities. It can become again a valuable natural resource for public use and enjoyment as well as a powerful economic engine. Securing permanent easements on Mill Creek real estate is a critical step in the river's renaissance.

Robin Corathers is executive director of the Mill Creek Restoration Project



THE ENQUIRER/LEIGH PATTON

Arlington Heights Academy students Danyell Thomas (left) and Marina Robinson put mulch around trees at Lincoln Heights Elementary School this month. The whole school planted trees as part of the Mill Creek Restoration Project.

Editorial from Cincinnati Enquirer, Thursday, April 27, 2006.