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Greenway plan a step closer

ENVIRONMENT: U.S. Rep. Pete Visclosky's plan would develop shoreline, link pedestrian, bike trails

BY GINA CZARK
gczark@nwitimes.com
219.933.3234

This story ran on nwitimes.com on Sunday, January 30, 2005 12:02 AM CST

Instead of going to Chicago's Navy Pier to watch the annual July Fourth fireworks, envision instead going to a public area in East Chicago complete with a beachfront and riverwalk.

That scene is now closer to reality for Northwest Indiana following the completion of an eight-month feasibility study for the Marquette Greenway Plan.

Spearheaded by U.S. Rep. Pete Visclosky, the plan seeks to recapture at least 75 percent of the Lake Michigan shoreline, from Whiting to Portage, to create an area for public use similar to the one adjacent to Chicago's Lake Shore Drive. The project also includes a minimum 200-foot setback from the shoreline for all new structures and a link between pedestrian and bicycle trails from the Illinois state line to Porter County.

Visclosky, D-Ind., wants to see the amount of lakeshore accessible to the public, now estimated at 33 percent, increase. According to a feasibility study, shoreline access would increase up to 82 percent.

"Something has to happen here," Visclosky said. "This is an investment in our future and a time where we need to fundamentally change things in Northwest Indiana."

Going beyond Indiana

John Swanson, executive director of the Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, believes the project could extend past Porter County, and said he is willing to conduct another

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Other key Northwest Indiana projects are moving forward as well. They include

Gary/Chicago International Airport
Within weeks, the Federal Aviation Administration is expected to rule on Gary/Chicago International Airport's \$90 million expansion proposal.
A thumb's up from the administration would allow airport officials to seek money for a project they hope will allow larger planes to fly safely to Gary and accommodate more passengers.
The plan is to extend the main runway to the west, add to safety buffers, expand taxiways and enlarge the passenger terminal. To accommodate the longer runway, the Elgin, Joliet & Eastern Railway would have to be shifted to the west. Federal approval would allow the airport to apply for federal improvement grants, which airport leaders hope to combine with state and local money to pay for the project.

feasibility study on further expansion.

"I see value in continuing it all the way to the Michigan line," Swanson said. "This team has done an extraordinary piece of work and we'd like to see it continue to benefit LaPorte County."

Swanson isn't the only one who's interested in seeing the project expand eastward. Visclosky said he has been approached by U.S. Rep. Chris Chocola, R-Ind., who asked to become involved.

"There's a light at the end of the tunnel because people now want to be like us," Visclosky said.

Part of the plan also would connect westward into Illinois. The plan calls for a coordinated effort with city of Chicago officials to extend a proposed trail that would start at the Hammond Marina into Calumet Park, which is just over the Illinois border.

With Lake Michigan as one of the nation's greatest resources, Visclosky said the project should appeal to everyone.

It's already on the radar screen of mayors of five lakefront cities, including East Chicago, Gary, Hammond, Portage and Whiting. Even though leadership in the majority of those communities changed since the development was first announced 15 months ago, Visclosky said the project's focus and commitment remain unchanged.

To complete the eight-month feasibility study by JJR, of Chicago, an urban planning and environmental consulting firm, the mayors each contributed \$8,000. That was enough to provide a local match for a \$160,000 grant from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources to get the project moving.

"We have to start recognizing we're a lakefront community," said Greg Calpino, JJR project director. "This is an opportunity to recapture new jobs and improve the economy. Our goal is to plant the seed and make sure it filters to everyone else."

The information already is being digested by local communities, particularly those along Lake Michigan. Portage Mayor Doug Olson and Whiting Mayor Joe Stahura have begun work on incorporating the plan into their city's master plans.

"This is another tool for cities along the lakefront to have vision of what's to come," Olson said.

Stahura said he plans for Whiting to become engrossed in the project next year, when he could seek and push for outside financial resources.

His first goal then would be to develop the lakeshore north of Whiting Park by removing large boulders and possibly creating a new barrier connecting a biking and walking trail.

"Everyone in our city departments understands how the new corridor will be defined," Stahura said. "We've been supportive of the plan and will continue to be so. It's a great opportunity."

One step at a time

While officials agree the chance to alter the region's lakeshore is enticing, Visclosky said he also wants to make it realistic. The project's master plan calls for the start of many short-term projects, including trail upgrades, land acquisition and possible downtown enhancements, like a streetscape project in Miller extending to the lakeshore.

Once initial changes are made, larger projects, like traffic-impact studies and environmental reports, could be commissioned.

"We have to do the right thing now so five years from now we're doing a ribbon cutting,"

Expansion of the South Shore Line

The next steps in the expansion of the region's rail service are to begin and complete a critical study and secure nonfederal dollars to support the project. Those closest to the project say service could begin within eight years if everything goes as planned.

The first phase of the project, estimated to cost about \$210 million, would extend the South Shore Line through Hammond and Munster.

The second phase, which would cost about \$130 million, would expand the rail east to Valparaiso through Highland, Schererville, Griffith, Merrillville and Hobart and south to Lowell through Dyer, St. John and Cedar Lake. Stops would exist in many of these communities.

By the end of March, the South Shore's operator, the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District, will solicit interest from consulting firms to do the Westlake Corridor Expansion Study, officials have said. Two phases of the study must be completed and show favorable results.

Visclosky said.

With final details of the plan and an exact time line not in place, Visclosky said more time could be focused on searching for and securing money for the project.

"The goal is not to increase taxes," Calpino said.

With Indiana's fiscal year beginning July 1, Visclosky is using the date as an unofficial deadline to begin officially moving forward with the plan.

"Something has to happen here," Visclosky said. "This is an investment and you have to spend money to have something to show for it."

While money will do much to enhance the shoreline, one thing it can't do is undo the region's history. The industries that line Lake Michigan, particularly in Lake and Porter counties, will remain in place and won't undergo a face-lift.

"You can't hide it, you have to embrace it," Calpino said. "You have to celebrate our heritage. These communities are here because of those jobs. It's your skyline."

In other places, even as far away as Germany, Calpino said officials have further incorporated industrial landmarks into designs by creating museums on the land and illuminating the structures with colored lights.

Realizing the shoreline enhancement is years away from completion, Visclosky said he's confident it will leave time to garner the needed support and make sure the project is done correctly. With the feasibility study complete, he said he'll continue to publicize the plan, work on securing funding and find ways to partner with private or public entities.

"Timing is everything," Visclosky said. "The time is right. This is the decade to do this. The stars are aligned and shame on us if we don't do it now."

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