

Mud to Park -Brainchild of John Marlin

By Phil Bloomer, Champaign News-Gazette

Along the Illinois River near Peoria, giant clamshell buckets scoop up great piles of mud and dump it into barges.

Mud, Illinois River mud, central Illinois sediment, fertile topsoil gone under. Its resurrection began last week in a major undertaking called the Mud-to-Parks project. Over the next month, some 105,000 tons of sediment will be dredged from Peoria Lake where it meets the Illinois River, loaded onto 70 barges and shipped 163 miles up the river to Chicago's old U.S. Steel site near where Calumet City joins Lake Michigan. That site is now a brownfield, an abandoned, barren, rusting, slag-filled stretch of useless land where nothing grows. The sediment will be spread across the slag, covering 17 acres to a depth of 2 to 3 feet.

The city of Chicago has been working with U.S. Steel for 10 years to reclaim the site. Eventually, 100 acres of lakefront will be turned into a park, with another 200 acres redeveloped into residential, commercial and light industrial uses.

There's plenty of sediment to work with. Scientists estimate some 14 million tons of silt a year are dumped in the river basin.

Heralding the start of the project last week was an unusual alliance. Gathered on the riverbanks were Democratic Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn; U.S. Rep. Ray LaHood, R-Peoria; state Rep. Dave Leitch, R-Peoria; river conservationists from Heartland Water Resources Council; and a bevy of Champaign-Urbana survey scientists.

And there wasn't even any mudslinging. Of course, this wasn't the Salt Fork River.

This elaborate, bipartisan undertaking was the brainchild of John Marlin, whom you may have heard of if you've lived here awhile. Marlin, of Urbana, is a senior scientist at the Waste Management Research Center, a Champaign-based division of the Department of Natural Resources. He's also the former head of the Illinois Pollution Control Board and a long-ago ringleader of the successful effort to block the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers from flooding 1,600 acres of Allerton Park.

Despite those and a few other scientific credentials, he's also the guy who wasn't considered qualified enough by the Champaign County Board Republicans to be appointed to the Champaign County Forest Preserve Board in 1994.

But there he was last week, honcho of a ground-(sediment?)breaking effort that will help save rivers and lakes, enliven wildlife habitats and restore brownfields.

"This is a model of bipartisan, intra-agency cooperation," Quinn said. "And it's a living tribute to the vision and tenacity of Dr. John Marlin, who showed us all how one person can make a difference."

Marlin's been doing this awhile. Experiments in 1999, with river sediment used to grow five different species of plants in Champaign greenhouses, showed no differences from plants grown in regular ol' black Drummer-Flanagan.

More recently, survey scientists spread sediment over sandy soil in Mason County in the western part of the state and saw fourfold increases in corn production and a 1.6 percent increase in soybean production from those plots.

Initially, there were fears that the silt would carry unacceptable levels of chemicals, but Marlin said that hasn't proven true.

Marlin said the idea of retrieving sediment for reuse isn't really new.

“What is new is the idea of taking it that far away and using barges to do it,” Marlin said. Each barge carries the equivalent of 75 truckloads of dirt. In urban areas, developers get that dirt from suburban areas and truck it through the city.

“This saves topsoil, saves costs and puts the sediment back to work much more efficiently,” Marlin said.

More importantly, the dredging will restore rivers and lakes. Some 60,000 acres of Illinois River backwaters have lost more than 70 percent of their capacity this century, Marlin said. The river and sloughs have filled in to the extent they are of no use to fish, waterfowl and other plants and animals, except maybe Asian carp.

That's a lot of job security for Marlin, survey scientists, river advocates and other tree-hugger types. Quinn said their recognition at the state level is overdue.

Maybe someday they'll get it in their own back yards.