

Open spaces urged for healthy river

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FALLS--Before the canoes were launched, Dean Naujoks pointed to the tiny freshwater mussels living inches below the surface of the upper Neuse River, just below the Falls Lake dam. "See their little white shells?" he asked. "You won't see those farther downstream."

Naujoks, the Upper Neuse Riverkeeper, served as tour guide Thursday to a delegation that included state legislators, Wake County commissioners and a Raleigh City Council member.

The trip, which followed a news conference, was sponsored by a coalition of local governments and environmental groups. The event was intended to raise awareness of the river's imperiled water quality and promote a \$50 million bond issue for open space preservation on the Oct. 9 ballot in Wake County.

"The open space money we get through the bonds is used to protect water quality," said Tony Gurley, the commissioners' chairman. "Our goal is to preserve 30 percent of the county as open space. About 10 percent is already preserved."

The bond boosters paired off into 15 canoes and kayaks to paddle the two miles of slowly flowing water between Falls of the Neuse and the Capital Boulevard bridge.

"If I go in, I'm taking somebody with me," Gurley declared.

It was the canoe carrying state Sen. Neil Hunt and Raleigh council member Russ Stephenson, however, that flipped. Hunt was dunked well above the waistband of his seersucker shorts.

"The water was nice and clean," Hunt said. "I even tasted some of it."

Naujoks called the group to a sandbar at the mouth of Richlands Creek, a small tributary that empties into the river after flowing through Wake Forest and Wakefield Plantation. Naujoks explained how rainwater running off suburban lawns, cul-de-sacs, strip-mall parking lots and golf courses is funneled into storm drains that empty into the creek, greatly increasing its flow and eroding its banks.

What may be a small rivulet on sunny days can dump tons of mud into the river during a storm.

"As soon as we get a little rain, this river turns red-orange," said Naujoks, a full-time advocate paid by the nonprofit Neuse River Foundation.

There were signs of aquatic life in the increasingly cloudy water -- dragonfly nymphs and mayfly larva.

Naujoks said urban building codes, such as the minimum required width of paved roads, often contribute to

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increased stormwater pollution. "Fire marshals like those wide streets so they can turn their trucks around," Naujoks said.

Aside from the floating Gatorade bottles and discarded bait boxes, it was possible to imagine how the river might have looked centuries ago. A white-tailed deer, startled by the canoes, took off through the brush. A red-tailed hawk circled overhead.

But the love calls of the cicadas were marred by the beeping of backing earthmovers and the rhythmic hammer blows of workmen erecting homes overlooking the river.

A half-acre lawn kept green by an automatic sprinkler system can use up to 200,000 gallons of water a year, Naujoks said, depleting water supplies and washing the phosphorous and nitrogen from fertilizers into the river. Through preserving land from development, local governments protect rivers and streams by limiting such runoff and letting soil and vegetation suck up stormwater.

The traffic on Capital Boulevard could be heard long before its concrete bridges came into view from around a bend in the river. As Naujoks had predicted, the water was muddy, and no live mussels appeared to be left in the shallows.

After the two-hour tour, the elected officials and reporters piled into a pair of 15-passenger vans to be ferried back to their cars.

Breezing past the new neighborhoods of Bedford and Falls River, the officials marveled at the explosion of development -- growth made possible by the actions of their boards.

A delegation of elected officials sets off in canoes Thursday from below Falls Lake in North Raleigh. The Neuse River trip was aimed at raising awareness about the river's endangered water quality.

Staff Photos by Chris Seward

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