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Minnesota engineering company devising plan for Squaw Creek watershed improvements

By Gavin Aronsen, Staff Writer garonsen@amestrib.com January 7, 2014 - 11:19pm

A Minnesota-based water engineering company is devising a long-term plan to improve the quality of the Squaw Creek watershed with the help of grant money awarded to Story County last year by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

The company, Emmons and Olivier Resources Inc. (EOR), was awarded a \$138,000 contract from the county in October to assess problems with the watershed, including erosion and sedimentation, flooding in Ames, nutrient runoff from agricultural land and the loss of biodiversity.

The 20-year plan is being drafted over the course of one year for the Squaw Creek Watershed Management Authority, a group formed in 2012 with state grant money whose board includes Ames Mayor Ann Campbell and Assistant City Manager Bob Kindred.

"In Iowa, the concept of developing these watershed management plans is kind of a new idea," said Pat Conrad, a water resources specialist with EOR.

The DNR, interested in longer-term solutions to flood mitigation, has been investing some of its funds allocated for that purpose into improving watersheds.

Squaw Creek's watershed management authority is comprised of representatives from Ames, Gilbert, Stanhope and Stratford, and water conservation districts in Story, Boone, Hamilton and Webster counties.

In December, the Ames City Council directed Campbell to continue engaging the watershed management authority as the city determines how to implement a flood mitigation strategy in response to the 2010 flood that hit South Duff Avenue and parts of the Iowa State University campus.

"I think it's fair to say that both Bob and I came away from (the watershed management's authority's last) meeting feeling as if there was real cooperative progress in looking at the watershed issues, both from the flooding as well as the nutrient standpoint, and having a more global look at how this would impact Ames," Campbell said.

Prairie Rivers of Iowa, an Ames-based land stewardship organization, is working with EOR as a subconsultant focusing on gathering public input from residents of the towns where the Squaw Creek watershed is located. That process will begin in late January or early February, according to Conrad.

"We're hoping to bring a lot of voices to the table, so that we have a plan that's implementable, not just a plan that will be on the shelf," said Penny Brown Huber, executive director of Prairie Rivers. "I think that's one of EOR's strengths, that they do realistic watershed plans."

Conrad said he expected to hear feedback about the planning from agriculture and conservation groups as well as landowners along the watershed and residents who might want to use the creek

for recreation once it's cleaned up.

Erv Klaas, an Ames environmentalist who represents the Story County Soil and Conservation District on the watershed management authority's board, said restoration could create a "real natural amenity people could enjoy," with recreational activities such as bike paths, parks and fishing along the creek.

But plans such as Klaas' may not happen until well into future.

When EOR's planning is complete around October, more state grant money will be sought to begin pursuing its recommendations, according to Story County Supervisor Paul Toot, who chairs the watershed management authority.

Funding beyond that would have to be approved by individual political subdivisions within the watershed, such as the Ames City Council, as they continue to focus on shorter-term solutions to flood mitigation.