



Friends of the Neches River seek national designation

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The Friends of the Neches River, along with help from the Texas Conservation Alliance, have launched a new campaign seeking to have the Neches River designated a National Scenic River by the U.S. Congress.

Dr. Michael Banks, co-founder of the Friends, said such a designation would have both economic and ecological benefits for the area. He said his group is conducting informational meetings to any civic groups in the Neches River Basin interested in learning the details of this new proposal.

“I did two informational programs in Lufkin recently about this, and we have gotten really good feedback from the public so far; they have been all for it,” Banks said. “Right now we are working to present this initiative to the public as much as possible, in order to lay the groundwork for this.”

The first step in having a river designated as a National Scenic River is getting a study bill passed by the federal legislature. Banks said he has already discussed the idea with U.S. Rep. Jeb Hensarling, representative for Cherokee County.

“I’ve talked to Hensarling about the idea, and he told me that he has voted for scenic rivers in the past. He has agreed to evaluate the process ô in fact he was very receptive to looking into it ô and we are pleased with that,” he said. “We hope that he will be able to initiate the study bill during this Congressional session. If the study bill passed, it would establish either the National Park Service or the U.S. Forest Service, or both together, to administer a study of the river.”

The agency would form an advisory group of local landowners, representatives of the timber and tourism industries, and recreational lake-users in order to determine what impacts the designation may have on the Neches.

Assuming no opposition to the designation comes forward, Banks said it will likely take three years before the river is officially named a scenic river.

“Once the study is complete, the advisory board will make a recommendation to the agency, the agency will make its recommendation to Congress, and Congress would then have to pass another bill to make the designation official,” Banks said. “Once a study bill gets passed, unless there is opposition by another Congressman that has the river in their district, it is usually a done-deal.”

The designation as a National Scenic River would block physical changes to the river, protecting the Neches from future attempts to alter the flow of the river — like the proposed Fastrill Reservoir would.

“By preventing big reservoir projects, designating the Neches a scenic river would protect riverside landowners and the miles of bottomland forest along the river,” said Brent Kartye, Neches scenic river coordinator for the Texas Conservation Alliance. “It’s understandable, though, that people would worry about how the designation would affect them.”

Proponents say eminent domain would not be used should the Neches become a National Scenic River, and they insist that the change would involve “minimal government involvement at all.”

According to Banks, landowners would just be asked to follow the guidelines of a scenic river.

“They may be asked to do stream-side management of their timber raising and things like that, but once we have the designation, the landowners will be able to do with their land exactly what they can do now. I checked into that when we started looking into this,” Banks said.

There are 161 rivers and sections of rivers in the country which have been named National Scenic Rivers, but currently the only one in Texas is a 30-mile stretch of the Rio Grande River. If the Friends are successful in their efforts, the Neches River, from Tyler to Beaumont, would become the first Texas river to be designated as a National Scenic River in its entirety.

State Rep. Chuck Hopson is among those who feel having a Neches Scenic River would be good for economic development in East Texas.

“Scenic rivers are important tourism destinations, drawing visitors from all over the country. They’re an economic engine for motels, B&Bs, restaurants, outfitters, convenience stores and other businesses that bring outside dollars to the local economy,” he said.

For now, the Friends of the Neches River are working to spread awareness of their proposal to any ears willing to listen. Banks said he will meet again with Hensarling in the near future to find out if the representative is willing to author a bill calling for a study of the river.

“Protection of the Neches River is paramount. This would protect the culture and the history of the river, while bringing a lot of new people to this area to enjoy the river,” Banks said. “I think the only reason local people could object to this is because they just don’t understand what it would mean to the area. That’s why we are putting this information out there, to help people learn all they can about this.”

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Photos



The Neches River as seen looking upstream from Hobson Crossing. Local environmental groups have started an initiative to have the Neches named an official National Scenic River. Photo by Adrian Van Dellen Jacksonville Progress