

Presentation Promotes Neches River Preservation

By KELLY GOOCH
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Towering pine trees and a hardwood forest dot the area surrounding the Neches River. It's a place where animals, such as bald eagles, deer and beavers, reside and birds escape for the winter.



The Neches also is home to crystal clear springs, azaleas and the native Neches River rose-mallow. But it's more than beauty because it played a pivotal role in Texas history.

That's the picture that was painted for attendees Friday morning during a community presentation about the history and importance of the river. The presentation, which was given at an open meeting of the Gertrude Windsor Garden Club, took place at the Tyler Civic Theatre Center, 400 Rose Park Drive.

About 100 people showed up to the center, where they heard from Richard Donovan, author of "Paddling the Wild Neches;" Michael Banks, chairman of Friends of the Neches River; and Janice Bezanson, executive director of the Texas Conservation Alliance.

Donovan covered the river's role in Texas history; Banks provided information on the refuge and wild and scenic river designation; and Ms. Bezanson talked to attendees about how they can be involved in designating part of the river as a National Wild and Scenic River.

Donovan described the Neches as a 415-mile river that is "wound into Texas history."

"It's who we are. It began right here," he said.

He went on to talk about the Neches watershed and the early settlers who came to the area. At one time, he said people flooded into the El Camino Real and took up residence along the Neches watershed.

A lot of them were running from things, such as other people and the law, and the Neches area provided what they needed, including water and fresh fruits, Donovan said.

"East Texas was a Garden of Eden to (them) ..." he said. "One settler had difficulty deciding which deer to shoot from his front porch."

Donovan said as more people immigrated into the Neches Valley, saw mills began operation, and the East Texas lumber industry was born. Now, he said he wants children and older adults to be aware of this history and use the Neches as a classroom opportunity.



Banks said he hopes people have more appreciation for the Neches and will stand up for it.

He showed attendees a map of East Texas, which identified the river's headwaters west of Tyler in Van Zandt County and its emptying point in the Sabine Lake.

He also talked about the Neches River National Wildlife Refuge, an area in Anderson and Cherokee counties, downstream from Lake Palestine, where the city of Dallas had planned to build a reservoir. After a lengthy court battle that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, the refuge was upheld. Now, Banks said river proponents hope to protect the Neches once again by designating 216 miles of it as a National Wild and Scenic River. The designation, which would protect private property owners along the river as well as the river's wildlife, would require an act of Congress.

Banks said Reps. Jeb Hensarling and Louie Gohmert have been asked to introduce a bill that would allow a study of the river.

That study would then evaluate the merits of the river to see whether the designation should be considered, he said. Congress would later have to pass another bill to give the river its designation.

Ms. Bezanson, who described her experience on the Neches as "absolute magic," said the designation would prevent dams from being built and flooding huge portions of the river. However, people still could hunt and fish.

She said the designation also would be good for tourism, as paddle groups look to visit wild and scenic rivers.

Ms. Bezanson and Banks encouraged Friday's audience members to tell congressmen that they want the study done.

"The Neches River has a historic past ... and a future that depends on you," Banks said.