

New easement program available for landowners in eastern Morrison County

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June 12, 2021



Morrison County landowners are taking advantage of a new Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Easement Program along the Rum River.

Morrison County Soil and Water Conservation District (MCSWCD) Manager Shannon Wettstein told the County Board of Commissioners Tuesday, that there has been interest in the program among property owners on the west branch of the Rum River and on Tibbetts Brook. The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources began the program about a year and a half ago. The watershed area is in extreme eastern Morrison County.

“The whole Rum River is prioritized, so there’s more targeted areas that the state would like us to focus on,” Wettstein said. “But Tibbetts Brook and the west branch, there’s some really pristine properties out there that are going to protect water quality if they decide to enroll in this program. We have been talking to landowners out there and have some interest.”

A conservation easement is a voluntary and legally binding agreement between a landowner and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. It limits the use and development of the land in order to preserve the land's unique natural features that have important water quality and wildlife habitat value. Landowners retain ownership and use of the land and are paid 60% of the county-assessed land value for the easement. The Rum River Conservation Easements, however, require landowners to retire farmland.

"It's targeting those that are right on the waterfront, primarily for water quality reasons," Wettstein said.

Another program that is not quite as new, but has had some impact on Morrison County is the Mississippi Headwaters Habitat Corridor Project. That includes the watershed of the first 400 miles of the Mississippi River — from Itasca State Park to the southern border of Morrison County — and its main tributaries.

Though she said there have been a few easements around the Platte and Swan rivers, interest in this program hasn't been quite as high. This, Wettstein said, is because most of the Morrison County land in the watershed area is already developed or platted.

Wettstein said she believes the state has been working on new easement programs, in part, due to the success of Morrison County's most well-known conservation easement program: the Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) program with Camp Ripley. The MCSWCD has been running ACUB out of its office for about 15 years, according to Wettstein.

"It's been very successful in our partnership with Camp Ripley," she said. "It offers them added protection for future training opportunities. But then, also, for our goals, why it aligns so well with the district, is it's protecting resources and habitat into the future, perpetually. Also, I think, it does have some long-term economic benefits to the county as a whole to allow Camp Ripley to remain as it is."

Joining Wettstein in front of the Board were MCSWCD Water Plan Coordinator and Easement Specialist Lance Chisholm and Todd Holman, program director of The Nature Conservancy and Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape (CRSL) coordinator. Wettstein said the main reason for the visit was to answer any questions the Board might have regarding conservation easements.

Commissioner Jeffrey Jelinski asked Holman to explain the difference between the ACUB and the CRSL.

Holman said the ACUB program started in 2004 and focused primarily on the three-mile buffer around the Camp Ripley military installation. Its top priorities were conservation easements and "fee acquisitions."

In 2015, the Minnesota Legislature designated the CRSL as a state-recognized sentinel landscape, the first in the nation. Holman said the country took notice at the Department of Defense (DoD) level. In 2016, it was designated as a federal sentinel landscape.

“The landscape then went from a three-mile buffer out to almost a 10-mile buffer,” Holman said. “It’s based on watershed boundaries, but it’s about a 10-mile radius.”

It was at that time the missions of the project also expanded. Rather than just conservation easements and “fee acquisitions,” the federally-recognized program also worked to get funding for agricultural producers and forestry organizations. It aimed to bring practices, education, restoration and outreach to the whole landscape.

It also made ACUB a part of the CRSL.

ACUB is also a bit different from the new easement programs, Wettstein explained. The ACUB program also provides for working land, so farmland does not have to be retired.

As such, Board Member Randy Winscher asked what restrictions are still placed on landowners within the ACUB area. Chisholm said landowners can basically use the land for what they’re doing currently. They cannot, however, convert forest land into farmland or practice surface or sub-surface mining.

“Another allowable use would be, they can build some structures in easement acres if it supports their ag operation,” Chisholm said. “A hay shed, turkey barn, poultry barn. So if it supports an agricultural operation — grain bins — those type of structures may be built in easement acres.”

He also explained that, once the land is part of a conservation easement, it remains that way forever. Even if the ownership of the land is transferred, the easement remains. He said MCSWCD staff members work with new landowners to help them understand what it means to be a part of the program.

He added that the land does stay on the tax rolls, and that land values have not gone down on existing easement properties.

“These easements go with the land forever,” Chisholm said. “It’s going to keep that rural character there forever and ever.”

Board Member Greg Blaine asked if there was a certain goal either the MCSWCD or the state had in mind in terms of how much land it wanted to be under easement. Wettstein said, because ACUB is different and has more involvement at the state and federal levels, there is a goal with that to maintain 75,000 acres.

The other, smaller programs do not have any specific goals attached. This is partially due to the fact that the portions of the watersheds within Morrison County are not identified as priority areas.

“The state will be awarding money in the future and then we will work the properties that have, really, the highest benefit for habitat and water protection,” Wettstein said. “But it’s going to be, again, a limited number of properties. So, at this time, we don’t have specific acreage goals like we do for ACUB.

“It will probably be some, really, riverfront properties that are forested or that want to do some restoration work on them that we’ll be working with on these other programs,” Wettstein said.

Board of Commissioners Briefs:

In other business Tuesday, the Morrison County Board of Commissioners:

- Approved a low bid of \$62,173 from Lot Pros, Inc., for crack sealing of airfield pavement at the Little Falls/Morrison County Airport. Little Falls Public Works Director Greg Kimman received six bids, ranging from \$62,173 - \$106,460;
- Approved the purchase of a new Cisco appliance, five-year agreement and licenses to access VPN for \$4,185. Morrison County Social Services Director Brad Vold said the software needs to be updated to meet federal requirements and the appliance will be at the end of its life in 2022;
- Approved a 2021 new establishment license for Nilson Hardware/RV in Swanville;
- Approved a 2021 new mobile food license for Running Tacos in Royalton;
- Approved a conditional use permit for a Tier II dairy feedlot for Kevin and Lynelle Vetsch in Elmdale Township;
- Approved a conditional use permit for a Tier III swine feedlot for Daniel Sobiech in Swanville Township;
- Approved an amendment to the time on the large assembly permit for Pierz Freedom Fest. The gates will now open at 2 p.m., rather than 3 p.m., as what was initially approved;
- Approved a repurchase application for tax forfeited lands in the amount of \$23,894.53;
- Approved a request from the Hillman Area Whitetail Management Association to hold a raffle, Dec. 4, at Brother’s Porky Pine Bar and Grill;
- Authorized a resolution for a certificate of final payment to Anderson Brothers for roadwork; and

- Granted the 2021 annual solid waste hauler license to Doucette's Landscaping and Contracting Inc.

The next meeting of the Board of Commissioners is a planning session at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday, June 15, in the Board Room at the Morrison County Government Center.