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## Transforming Springdale

Tours show how cemetery is on its way to becoming 'historic savannah area'

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PEORIA — These days, it's easier to see why the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency eco-invested almost \$300,000 in Springdale Cemetery.

Take the tour.

On a chilly Thursday morning, more than a dozen people hopped on a CityLink trolley to do just that. They got a view of the cemetery's progress toward a far different future than anyone might have imagined just a few years ago.

"We're going to have a historic savannah area and a major environmental teaching lab - all built into a municipally owned cemetery that hopefully will be financially self-sustaining," predicts longtime Springdale activist Allen Andrews as the group inspects the placement of 300-pound rocks and freshly-graded roadsides.

In the valleys, the newly reinforced banks of the old Turkey Creek guide a trickle of clear water downstream. On the bluffs, the Illinois River glints through the bare trees.

In some places, these hills were so overgrown with maples and black locusts that it was easier to mark native trees to be saved than to tag invasive trees to be cut. Now tree stumps stud the hillsides, opening the once-gloomy cemetery to the light.

"This is how pioneers found the bluff line when they arrived in Peoria 300 years ago," says Michael Brown, president of Peoria Wilds. He points out the wider spacing of native oaks and walnuts, calling them "living proof of the cemetery's openness through the centuries."

Their connection to the river is no accident. Non-native maples have such dense shade that plants which once held the soil on these hills vanished - and so have the hills themselves, choking the river below. Springdale has been one of the biggest contributors to sediment in Upper Peoria Lake. Stabilizing these bluffs is considered a key move in efforts to save the river, which is one reason Springdale was chosen for the IEPA project. But the city-owned cemetery is also open to the public, which may prove a more important reason in the long run.

"A big aspect of this grant was education," explains the cemetery's general manager, Pat Lewis. "We're trying to make Springdale a classroom."

So Lewis and Brown collaborated for the planning commission to mark the end of construction on this first classroom tour. Thinning the trees already has regenerated some of the hills, and they expect more new growth in the spring. For evidence of the potential results, they took the group to the savannah where Peoria Wilds has been restoring the native grasses for nearly 20 years.

"It takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of people," Lewis says as he points out the way the encroaching forest has been pushed back and the water's rapid progress to the river has been checked with boulders and gabion baskets of rocks.

Over the last two and a half years, hundreds of volunteers and the Springdale staff combined for thousands of hours of work here. They provided the equivalent of \$240,000 to match \$280,000 in IEPA funds, which was overseen by the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission. It sounds simpler than it was, given the load of paperwork and regulatory hurdles, but everyone seems pleased with the results.

"We're done at the end of this," says project coordinator Margaret Martino. "It was a great project. We're using the same funding source to do the Mossville Bluffs project."

While the grant may be done, the work at Springdale continues. The general manager volunteers to give tours, in turn hoping for more volunteers.

"Although we've met our match, there's a lot of work that needs to be done," says Lewis.

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*Leslie Renken*

Pat Lewis, general manager of Springdale Cemetery, explains how selectively cutting trees on the cemetery's hillsides will help control erosion in the cemetery. Opening up the ground to more sunlight encourages the growth of small plants whose roots anchor the soil.



*Leslie Renken*

Gabion baskets in a stream bed is one of several erosion techniques that were on display during a tour of Springdale Cemetery hosted by the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission and the cemetery Thursday morning. Tour goers rode the Citylink trolley learning about restoration projects funded by the EPA over the past several years.