

Plight of the Plover

Wisconsin's Bill Cook Chapter rallies a town to protect a river.

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In September 2000, shortly before the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WDOT) held a public information meeting about a new highway in Stevens Point, Bruce Adamski, a member of the Bill Cook Chapter, went door to door with flyers that posed the question: “HWY 10 BYPASS THROUGH OUR TOWN?” Also on the flyer was a plea for residents to attend an upcoming meeting and oppose a section of the highway that would cross the Plover River, a tributary of the Wisconsin River that runs southwest for 42 miles through three counties. The flyers worked: Nearly everyone in the town showed up to oppose the bypass. “There was a huge turnout,” Adamski remembers. “DOT even ran out of materials.”

At stake was not just the rural character of the town, but also a reservoir on the Plover that had become a sanctuary for deer, otters, beavers, state-threatened wood turtles, eagles, ducks, and, of course, plovers—the stout shorebirds for which the river was named. Also, local residents treasured the river for its recreational opportunities such as canoeing, swimming, fishing, and hiking.

The Bill Cook Chapter’s long history of preserving the river also hung in the balance. As owner since 1946 of more than 100 acres on the river’s banks, the chapter was proud of its past success at preventing development. Members demanded strict zoning regulations and provided matching funds to help Stevens Point buy land in the valley—particularly along the river bottom between Highway 66 and Highway 10.

Then came the bypass challenge. Over the next 14 months the Bill Cook Chapter—led largely by the efforts of Adamski and fellow chapter members George Rogers and Dan Kohier—circulated countless letters, petitions, and resolutions to chapter members, citizens, the mayor, senators, state representatives, and the governor, as well as to the Portage County Planning and Zoning Commission and WDOT. The chapter’s resolution, signed in October 2000, stated, “We, the 280 members of the Bill Cook Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, are opposed to the above referenced ‘Northern Bypass Option’ and any similarly located highway.”

Yet, according to Adamski, after the initial meeting in September, WDOT continued to propose alternate bypass routes that at some point crossed the Plover. “It was really a constant and ongoing effort,” Adamski recalls. “We had to stay on top of it until DOT finally realized that there simply was no good spot to cross the river.” Dave Barth, an official at WDOT who helped organize the public information meetings, says that—from strictly an engineering perspective—crossing the Plover was the most

attractive option. “It was clearly the most direct route,” he points out, adding that WDOT’s responsibility is not only to consider viable corridors for construction, but also to try to prevent serious harm to the environment. “We have to thread a very fine needle sometimes,” he notes. “In as hard as we try, it’s impossible to get a total elimination of negative impacts.”

The Town of Hull, the Parks Department, and the Stevens Point Water Commission were also influential in their opposition of the bypass. The Town of Hull claimed that the proposed highway would destroy farmlands, neighborhoods, and woodlands and increase pollution and urban sprawl. The Parks Department worried about the noise of traffic and its beaches along the river. And because the Plover provides drinking water for the entire Stevens Point area—more than 25,000 people—the Water Commission argued that trucks carrying toxic materials could contaminate the water supply if they overturned and spilled their shipments.

“I was very concerned,” says Dan Trainer, a board member of the Plover River Alliance, which was formed in 1996 by local citizens to protect the river. “I thought we had a fifty-fifty chance.” To help his cause, Trainer convinced a woman from the state legislature to canoe down the river. “I kept telling her how beautiful the Plover was,” he recalls. “I told her to try it in a canoe and see for herself.” One day the woman gave in and canoed the river. Impressed by what she saw, she decided that the river was indeed a local treasure and should be protected.

Finally, on November 27, 2001, more than a year after the chapter’s resolution, WDOT announced in the *Stevens Point Journal* that the Plover crossing was no longer viable. “The highway’s not dead, but it won’t ever cross the Plover,” explains George Rogers. WDOT is currently investigating two possible crossings of the Wisconsin River.

In the end, WDOT’s research and data concluded what the Bill Cook Chapter knew all along—that the Plover River is a wonderful resource and needs to be protected. Says Barth, “It’s a great example of the process working.”

Bruce Adamski agrees, adding that working with the WDOT was a rewarding and worthwhile experience. “I truly enjoyed dealing with them,” he acknowledges. “They were honest and forthright when discussing the various issues involved with this highway project.”