

Watershed panel forms
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It's a creeping but perpetual problem, and it may be the key to the future of the Rivanna watershed.

It's dirt. Well, more specifically, the sediment in the basin that chokes stream beds and affects everything from the bugs on the bottom of a river to the fish in the water.

That dirt - where it comes from and what can be done about it - is one of the major issues that the Rivanna River Basin Commission is likely going to try to tackle. The recently formed, 14-member commission has been given the task of assessing the problems of the impaired river and its waterways and seeing what can be done about them.

"The river is both an indicator of our general stewardship, and it's also one of the most enjoyable parts of our environment, if we treat it right," said Albemarle County Supervisor Sally H. Thomas, who is leading the commission as its chairwoman. Though impaired, "[the Rivanna River is] not in horrible condition. ... It's not a huge river; it's our river. And it's one we can get our arms around. That's why I'm optimistic we can make a difference."

Among other members, the commission is made up of two elected officials from the four localities where Rivanna watershed issues are most prescient. Charlottesville, Albemarle, Fluvanna County and Greene County elected officials serve on the commission, which has had three meetings and has another scheduled for early August. The commission has recently appointed a technical committee, a panel of experts who will give guidance and technical advice.

The commission eventually will make recommendations, and the local leaders will bring those back to their respective boards for action. Thomas said that having elected leaders directly involved would increase the likelihood of change.

The Rivanna watershed - streams, rivers and other bodies of water that feed the Rivanna River - takes up nearly a half-million acres in seven different localities, according to the Nature Conservancy.

Ridge Schuyler, a Nature Conservancy director who spearheaded the effort to get the commission into action, said sediment chokes aquatic life and affects drinking water.

"Sediment literally suffocates the life out of the system," Schuyler said. "It also is filling up our reservoir and displacing drinking water capacity. It affects the creatures in the river and it affects us as drinkers of water from the river."

Schuyler said the commission could be among the first to tackle the issue. Research has been done, but Schuyler said he's not aware of a group in the United States that has come up with ways to comprehensively address the problem.

"We could have a lot to teach other communities," he said.

John Martin, an Albemarle resident who serves on the commission, said one of the big tasks would be to figure out where the sediment is coming from. Albemarle, for example, was largely de-forested in the 19th century, he said.

The commission has \$250,000 in private donations at its disposal. With that comes huge responsibility, Martin said.

"We've just got to start doing work now ... to make sure in 100 years [the watershed is] still OK," he said.