City approves historic plan to address stormwater issues in the Sand River channel

by Joanna Dunn Samson

When it rains, it pours into the Hitchcock Woods … literally! All of the water that falls on paved surfaces in the downtown area during a rainstorm flows into the city's antiquated stormwater system, which in turn discharges the water *directly* into the Woods. Over the past fifty years, as the city's downtown area grew and prospered, the amount of unmanaged stormwater has increased dramatically, causing devastating damage and erosion to the Woods and its delicate wetlands and natural ecosystems. Forty years ago, a visitor to the Woods could walk across the Sand River channel; today the banks of that channel are seventy feet high at the entrance to the Woods—the direct consequence of the old, inadequate municipal system that directs and dumps the stormwater into the channel.

Finally, after all that damage and twenty years of studies and ineffective stop-gap measures, Mayor Rick Osbon tackled the problem. His determination paid off. Last November, his administration presented Aiken City Council with Phase I of a long-term plan to address the destructive runoff from the downtown area into the Woods, and in January, council approved the plan unanimously.

The approval came almost a year and a half after the mayor initiated the Stormwater Task Force comprised of representatives of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation, citizen stakeholders, and city representatives. The task force, which was run by Interim City Manager Stuart Bedenbaugh, selected McCormick Taylor out of Columbia to serve as its technical consultant. The task force was also advised by Clemson University, who assisted in the collection and verification of data from various locations in the downtown watershed.

"The plan developed by McCormick Taylor and endorsed unanimously by the task force is a giant step towards an achievable solution," says Pat Corey, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation. "The approved plan is a common sense, cost-effective solution that can be implemented over time, allowing the city and the foundation to garner additional financial and technical resources through grant opportunities. The foundation is deeply grateful for the city's commitment to stop the destruction of the Woods after all this time."

The long-term plan involves the construction of a variety of widely-used and proven BMPs (Best Management Practices) in strategic places and the ultimate restoration of the Sand River channel. Attractive and practical dry detention beds will be constructed on certain parkways with the appropriate hydraulic properties; existing detention ponds in certain areas may be upgraded and expanded; and underground detention facilities will be built on Hitchcock Woods property.

Phase I of the plan is expected to commence this year.

Want to help? Experiencing flooding caused by rain and City runoff? Visit ***www.clemson.edu/extension/carolinclear/stormwater101.html*** *to learn what you can do to help solve the problem.*

The 70' cliffs in the Sand River channel caused by stormwater erosion. Bennett Tucker, Woods Superintendent, is standing in the right hand corner.