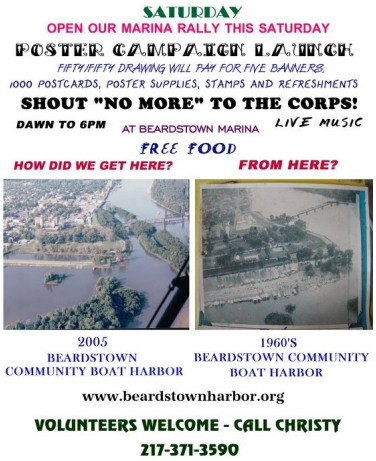
Local activist holds marina rally



By Aaron Tebrinke
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Duty, responsibility, and the pursuit of happiness— every one of us choose to defend something for a principled reason, or decide to exclusively chase the possibility of bliss. Christy Bley took it upon herself to make a happy event, at great personal expense, to shed light on an issue that effects the lives of all residents of Beardstown. Starting before dawn on Saturday, April 28, Bley set up the “Open Our Marina” event at Beardstown Harbor with the hope of getting people to come together, be aware of, and eventually solve the issues with the Marina area. Bley’s message: the Army Corps of Engineers in the Rock Island District have avoided their role in clearing out the silt that is filling up Muscooten Bay, and need to take an active role in restoring access to the river.

Drivers parked their cars to share similar stories about how they admired the grand assortment of boats that lined each side of the harbor. While enjoying a hot dog or a barbeque some people worried about how the rescue squad could gain access to the river if an emergency would come up. Others reflected that the economic impact has changed the city completely over the years. There is no official estimate how much money has been lost from tourism due to not having river access, but considering that an entire industry has been removed from the area over a thirty-plus year span one can correctly assume that it is in the tens of millions. Boaters that stayed overnight shopped in stores, bought fuel, and ate in restaurants in now bypass this area

completely. Many of the boaters came from our nearby state capitol, including wealthy decision makers and policy architects.

Some citizens that did not want to be named shared their disgust with the farmers north of the bay who influenced politicians to reroute the Sangamon River for their personal profit and knowingly depriving the citizens of Beardstown river access. The stories have turned into folklore with faceless characters signing documents in dimly lit rooms to seal the fate of the harbor, but the results are visible: silt in the bay that will eventually fill it completely without any action.

Bley made a request that she hopes policy makers will hear.

"I want the Corps to do the same thing that they did to Spunky Bottoms," Bley said referencing the area 15 miles south of Beardstown along the west side of the Illinois River next to the Meredosia National Wildlife Refuge, "They are restoring the backwater, installing a small pump station and putting in place siltation filters."

(The St. Louis District is taking on the project, not the Rock Island District service provider).

They are coming up to build tributary sediment traps and attempt to naturally filter sediments and contaminants from run-off. Collected funds from several sources aim to restore forest, prairie, and wetland habitats for migrating waterfowl. The project intends to provide passage for aquatic organisms between restored habitats and the river. This will also act as an emergency spillway to reduce damages from extreme floods.

The Meredosia National Wildlife Refuge is a 5,255 acre national wildlife refuge located along the Illinois River in Cass County and Morgan County. The refuge is adjacent to Meredosia, but is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from a headquarters located in Havana.

The Spunky Bottoms project was funded by The Nature Conservancy, IL DNR, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Illinois Natural History Survey, The Wetlands Initiative, The North American Wetlands Conservation Act, Wetland Conservation Act conservation easement, the Open Lands Trust Partnership, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, The Wetlands Initiative, several universities, colleges and additional gifts from over 40 large partners.

In 2010 Congressman Aaron Shock earmarked a bill for the Spunky Bottoms Restoration in Brown County, IL that specified $5,736,000 would go towards project modifications for improvement of the environment. The budget request was set aside for the Army Corps of Engineers in an Energy and Water Appropriations Bill, Section 1135. In the final bill it received $24,220,000 and most earmarked projects were listed as priority projects but without specific funding amounts.

Millions have been invested for the environment around Spunky Bottoms & the refuge as a noble and necessary task. The City of Beardstown currently does not have the economic investment that the floodplain south of Beardstown does at this time. The money for the river access will need to come from a variety of sources as the Spunky Bottoms project, but it will not happen without the demand of the public. It was Bley's intention to get hundreds of concerned citizens to write a personal plea to open the marina on one of the thousand postcards she plans to deliver to the Rock Island Corps. She created a collection of cards that have been signed by voters. Featured messages will be shared via www.beardstownharbor.com or on Facebook after the final signatures have been collected.

Part of the event was a fund raiser for the signs and postcard supplies using a 50/50 drawing for two hanging ferns, a fire pit and a new playhouse for kids. "The signs are going to do the work for me," Bley stated. "A lot of people have put a lot of time into opening the marina and are getting burned out. The banners will be posted on my building facing the river (121 W Main St.) for three years. I couldn't use my money to buy a boat because I can't get to the river, so I invested it in the signs." She plans to permanently post five 2'x10' signs she displayed at the rally. The posters are high quality ink on vinyl and shout slogans in large bold capped letters: OPEN OUR MARINIA CORPS!, HELP! CORPS IS KILING US!, STOP CUTTING EAGLE TREES!, STOP FLOODING OUR HARBOR! and BOATERS ARE VOTERS! The sings are intended to been seen by passing boaters and the Corps while they travel by.

One of the supporters, Jack Fearneyhough of the Project Tiger Pride, made his opinion known: " If the community wants to win this battle, hundreds of people are going to need to speak up. It is a crime that we don't have river access. People have to get back in the fight again and again."