

# Murray returns to his roots to head Friends of the Rouge

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STAFF WRITER

You might say Jim Murray's life has come full circle. As a child growing up in the city of Wayne, Murray played along the banks of the Lower Rouge River, during the days when the river was little more than an open sewer. Years later in 1986, Murray, appalled by the condition of the river, helped form Friends of the Rouge, a non-profit group dedicated to reversing its fortunes.

Last week, Murray became executive director of the organization, which is based in Dearborn Heights and has an office on the campus of the Cranbrook Educational Community in Bloomfield Hills. Friends of the Rouge had been without a leader since former director Jim Graham was fired by the group's board of directors eight months ago. Murray, who most recently served as the director of the Wayne County Department of Environment, and has been the drain commissioner in both Wayne and Washtenaw counties, sees the appointment as an opportunity to help maintain the momentum in restoring the river.

"I played along the Rouge flood plain while growing up. I used to raft on it in the summer and skate on it in the winter. So my relationship with the Rouge goes way back. I'm very excited about this opportunity," he said.

## ROUGE RESCUE LEADER

Murray, who has helped secure many federal and state grants to clean up the river, said the river is much cleaner today than it was when he formed Friends of the Rouge and Rouge Rescue, an annual volunteer cleanup of the river. Many sources of pollution have been eliminated, including the sewage overflows that plagued the Rouge for years.

Oxygen levels in the river have also increased dramatically, which is helping re-establish fish and aquatic insect popula-

## Barnett to speak on Rouge issues

Farmington Hills City Councilwoman Vicki Barnett will speak on issues involving the Rouge River that affect Farmington area residents at 7 p.m. March 31.

The meeting will be held at the Farmington Hills City Hall council chambers at Orchard Lake and 11 Mile. The public is urged to attend. Admission is free and refreshments will be provided.

The meeting is sponsored by the city of Farmington Hills and the Farmington Riparian Stewards. The latter is a new group dedicated to promoting and applying river-friendly practices. After Barnett's speech, there will be a presentation describing the various summer activities being sponsored by the city. Farmington Riparian Stewards and the Friends of the Rouge.

tions throughout the river system. Despite the successes, he realizes there is still a ways to go before the river becomes the recreational resource he envisions.

"The river is 10 times better than it was 15 years ago. We have to take a look at those achievements and remember where we're at. But we still have some obstacles to tackle," Murray said.

Largely an urban river, the Rouge River watershed encompasses 438 square miles, and covers much of Oakland and Wayne counties. More than 1.5 million people live within the area that drains to the river. Sally Petrella, the longtime

public involvement coordinator for the Friends of the Rouge, said Murray will serve two vital functions for the group, which monitors the health of the river, educates the public, and coordinates cleanup efforts.

"Jim will be doing two things for us. He will lead our fundraising efforts, which is necessary for us to achieve our goals. He will also act as the spokesperson for the group. When there is an oil spill, or something of that nature, he will be the one to address the public about it," she said.

## AN OPPORTUNITY

Murray, a Livonia resident, became available after being let go by new Wayne County Executive Robert Picano, who hired Kurt Heise to take over the department of environment.

"It was the first time I was ever fired from a job," Murray said.

Don Griffin, a Friends of the Rouge board member since 1977, says Murray's firing was an opportunity. He said the board was desperately trying to find a leader for the group, so he approached Murray about the job. He believes Murray's passion for the Rouge, as well as his connections with both local governments and the business community will be a boon for the group, which he said has been lacking leadership.

"Jim started Friends of the Rouge. He was really the spark plug behind our organization. We need him now," he said.

"You need a visionary for a leader. And you need an administrator to make sure things get done in an appropriate manner. I feel prouder and more hopeful than I have for several years. If he is half the man he was when he started the group, we will be in good shape."

Griffin said Friends of the Rouge has an annual budget of about \$300,000. Murray, who is on an initial six-month contract, will be paid \$23,000 for the term.



Jim Murray stands on a bridge overlooking the Rouge River in Dearborn Heights. The former Wayne County official is the new executive director of the Friends of the Rouge.

## MEMBERSHIP WANES

Friends of the Rouge has gone through some growing pains in recent years. Griffin said membership has waned from about 1,000 members down to about 300. He said it was one of the main reasons Graham was let go.

"We weren't seeing any results. We just weren't standing for anything, or getting anything done," Griffin said. "He (Murray) has the contacts to turn things around. And I think he still has the guts, the heart and the brains to get the job done."

Murray recognizes the challenge of increasing member-

ship, but he doesn't think it will be that difficult because most people care about the fate of the Rouge. He said the group just needs to do a better job reaching out to residents.

"I see everyone that lives in this basin as a friend of the Rouge. We are very environmentally sensitive in this area. So I think we really have 1.5 million friends of the Rouge, and they all want to see us succeed," Murray said.

Murray sees Friends of the Rouge as an educational tool for the public. The next step in cleaning up the river, he said, is to inform the people how their actions are often detrimental to the Rouge. Among other

things, proper lawn and automobile care must be stressed. And while his life has come full circle, Murray doesn't think the river has quite done the same yet.

"For 50 years, the public didn't even know this river was here. We did everything we could to hide it, because it was dirty and dangerous. Now we're trying to reverse that, and bring people back down to its banks. We are starting to realize again that this river is a tremendous resource, and adds to the quality of life," he said.

"The Rouge hasn't come full circle yet, but it's getting around the curve."

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