

# Wisconsin DNR and the Portage Canal

## A better canal begins with sediment cleanup

### Early History

The roughly 2 ½ miles long Portage Canal was dug to link the Fox River to the Wisconsin River, with the goal of providing a continuous water highway from Green Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. Canal construction began in the 1830s and was completed in 1876. The canal did not become the vital transportation link that early entrepreneurs had envisioned, because the lower Wisconsin River would have required substantial alteration to become navigable and the railroads were expanding. However, it was used for both commerce and pleasure boating until 1961 when the lock operations at the northern and southern ends of the canal were discontinued.

Ownership of the canal transferred to the state in 1961 and in 1981, the Department of Natural Resources was designated with authority to govern the canal.

### Where are we now?

The City of Portage is working hard to revitalize and rehabilitate segments of the Portage Canal, which is now listed on the National and State Register of Historic Places. However, the canal does have a challenging obstacle that is getting in the way of current and future uses; the bottom sediment has environmental quality problems. For decades, stormwater runoff and possibly past industrial discharges have delivered pollutants to the canal. Over time, the bottom of the canal gathered sediment and pollutants such as metals and elevated organic material (leaves, grass, and other dead biomass). As a result, the canal has poor water quality and degraded aquatic habitat.



Flickr.com/NeenahHistory

Postcard image of the Portage Canal. More historical information is available on the Portage Canal Society's web page: <http://portagecanal.org/history.html>

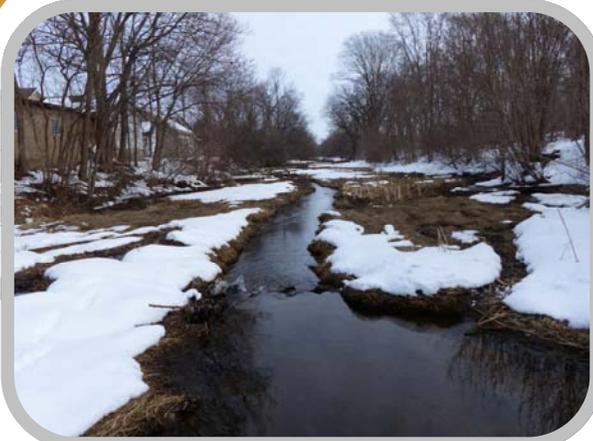


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The Portage Canal in an area that has been redeveloped by the City of Portage.

### Can the Canal Be Improved?

Yes, there are ways to restore degraded waterways and address water quality that is impaired by accumulated sediments and pollutants. The DNR has extensive experience restoring waterways. The Portage Canal is unique with regards to its historic use and creation as a man-made waterway, but there are some common threads that it shares with other problem sediment sites. These sediment sites require cooperation, collaboration, and careful



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Local partners aim to revitalize the Portage Canal following cleanup of polluted sediments.

planning by multiple stakeholder groups that may represent conflicting interests and that need to make large dollar decisions. These challenges can seem daunting, but they can be successfully navigated. Working through these challenges, DNR has successfully conducted both large and small-scale sediment clean-ups throughout the state.

Specific to the Portage Canal, the DNR intends to oversee the clean-up in a manner that ensures environmental solutions are dovetailed with the city's revitalization approach for each segment of the canal.



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A sediment core from the Portage Canal. Samples of the sediment were sent to a laboratory for analysis.

### What is next?

This past winter, the DNR performed additional testing through the ice, with more testing planned for 2013. The goal of the testing is to determine how much funding will be needed for the canal clean-up. The DNR is committed to using the information to work toward acquiring the appropriate funding.

### Reasons to be hopeful

The outlook for the Portage Canal is positive. Local partners are engaged through the city ad hoc committee and this group has had several recent meetings with the DNR. The Mayor's office has been supportive of revitalization efforts.

With decades of experience working on sediment sites, the DNR is prepared to be a strong partner to lead sediment cleanup aspects of the revitalization efforts. The DNR looks forward to working with the City, the ad hoc committee, citizens, and other state agencies to provide the complementary endpoint of a better canal for everyone.



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Soft sediments at the top of sediment cores typically contain more pollutants. Collecting samples at different depths helps to understand the distribution of pollutants within the canal.

**For more information about the sediment cleanup, contact Scott Inman, WDNR Sediment Engineer, (608) 264-9201 or e-mail [Scott.Inman@Wisconsin.gov](mailto:Scott.Inman@Wisconsin.gov)**

