

By Adam Poulisse

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## Former South Beloit industrial dumping ground to become nature center

SOUTH BELOIT — Beyond several feet of muck and debris, past the shell of a former muffler shop, Turtle Creek and the Rock River meet in a place brimming with nature and history.

A creek flows through part of the property. Eaglets regularly hatch on a small island of nesting eagles. The Ho-Chunk tribe once called it their home. But for the past 100 years, it has been a dumping ground for tires, glass, foundry sand, and other industrial waste.

Efforts are underway to remove garbage and pollution to make room for [Nature at the Confluence](#), a 75-acre preservation center that will include outdoor recreation, history and education when it opens this summer. The proposed nature center is at the former Dallman's Muffler & Exhaust, 306 Dickop St.

"It's been a junkyard and a dump and not a place where you can enjoy nature," said Therese Oldenburg, marketing and programming director for Nature at the Confluence. "But nature is there, and nature is persevering."

The overhaul costs about \$1 million and is in conjunction with the city of South Beloit and Beloit 2020, a nonprofit dedicated to rebuilding Beloit, Wisconsin, since the late 1980s but now also focuses on South Beloit. Planning on Nature at the Confluence began in 2005 but didn't pick up steam until 2011.

In the last few weeks, Nature at the Confluence "went back to the drawing board," according to Jeff Adams, a member of Beloit 2020 and economics professor at Beloit College. He declined to comment on the specifics but said they will be released in the next couple of weeks.

Despite the changes, the message for Nature at the Confluence will be the same.

"The confluence itself is largely intact," Adams said. "We're trying to rescue it and to serve its purpose, which will bring families and children to this natural resource."

About six volunteers have been working to remove eight feet of waste, broken glass and other garbage. The soil on the grounds isn't contaminated, so general cleanup efforts include clearing the debris and growing community gardens that will teach visitors about restoration, Oldenburg said. Two of the three buildings that made up the former muffler shop will remain to make up the nature center; one of them will be refurbished into a classroom.

In the late 1820s and 1830s, the Ho-Chunk established major villages at the confluence, reportedly housing about 600 people. But as heavy-duty industrial production such as metal pouring and metal bending took over the area surrounding the confluence, foundry sand and other materials were disposed of at the site.

"That's the challenge," Adams said. "You've got this industrial debris. You got a lot of blight and undervalued and vacant properties, but behind it is this wonderful natural resource."

When it's all cleared up, Nature at the Confluence will have a plethora of activities to offer visitors.

The grounds will partner with [Rocktown Adventures](#), an outdoor retailer and adventure club, for some of its potential programming such as paddling tours, yoga, and education about the area's rich history.

By using Rocktown Adventure gear, Nature at the Confluence won't have to invest in their own, according to Dan Bowers, paddling sports instructor and sales associates with Rocktown Adventures.

He said providing the paddling gear will raise awareness of the "awesome natural resources in our backyard."

"We're trying to expose people who may not be aware of everything you can do ... that (is) within a 20-minute drive of our area," Bowers said. "We're providing a safe, fun way for people to explore and teach possibilities and hopefully help people fall in love with paddling as we have."

The confluence is also the halfway point of the 320-mile [Rock River Trail](#), which could also influence the programming, Oldenburg said.

"I envision to have a visitors center where you can learn about the Rock River and Rock River Trail later down the road," she said. "It has potential."

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Therese Oldenburg of Nature at the Confluence picks up pieces of glass on the bank of the Turtle Creek on Wednesday, March 30, 2016, in South Beloit. Oldenburg says the area was used as an industrial dump site for over 100 years. MAX GERSH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/RRSTAR.COM