

# THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

## Pining for a Healthy Pine River: We're Going to Solve it Together

By William Meiners  
Herald Staff Writer

Thomas McCreery remembers fishing in the Pine River as a kid over 70 years ago. Before some of those subdivisions in Alma even existed, he could pull a silver fish from that water big enough to lay over both sides of a new canoe. Though those were the days of a healthier Pine River.

To see the river now can be like watching an old friend die. Green algae and lily pads scaling over it like ice. In 2012, Gary Rayburn got together with a few other couples to look at the diminishing state of the river he had purchased a home on. They met up near McCreery's futile dock. Only a few years earlier, you could pull up a pontoon boat there, load up a half dozen friends and head out to watch the fireworks on the fourth of July. Now you might sink into green muck with the water hardly rising above your ankles. There's no boating here.

At the time, Rayburn thought, "Boy, what did we buy into?"

In 2015, hoping to reverse the effects of the damage done to the river, Rayburn helped form the Healthy Pine River organization. The nonprofit, which currently has 349 members, hopes to protect and improve that river throughout Gratiot County.

### Organizational goals

Last Tuesday, a perfectly good day for boating, Rayburn sat on Chuck Sandro's back porch with Jane Keon, Sandro's neighbor. Three of nine board members from the Healthy Pine River group. The property backs up to the Honeyoey Creek, an offshoot stream of the Pine River. Not much more than a decade ago, when Sandro moved in, he and his wife could take their grandkids on a boat ride around the island behind them. Now, through an excess of sedimentation, they're "gaining acreage" they don't want. "It didn't take us long to realize that something was wrong," Sandro said.

Keon has lived two doors down twice now, first years ago as a teenager with her parents. She moved back in 2004 when her father was "alone and elderly." The fast-flowing river, she said went right around their property. But fast forward a few years and the water frontage on her property has shrunk by about 30 percent.

Keon's early letters to the drain commissioner and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) seemed to become an exercise in passing the buck. Or they simply were not being heard. Today, through the ongoing efforts of a building nonprofit, their broad mission is to "work within our organization and with the public and stakeholder groups to positively impact the river to achieve a healthy state."

Rayburn points to three specific goals, which includes removing and reducing harmful contaminants, such as excess bacteria, nutrients, and E.coli; reducing sedimentation, erosion, and unwanted vegetation; and actively promoting (and caretaking) the river for recreational use and aesthetic value.

Though Rayburn can put it more bluntly, as well. And it's not just from folks living on the river, as most the organization members do not. "Clearly people are starting to wake up," Rayburn said. "We need something done because this river is dying. We did a study in 2017 that shows there's four-to-five feet of sedimentation on the bottom and it's getting worse and worse every year."

### Community outreach

The trio on Sandro's porch will tell you there's more cows than people in Gratiot County. More pigs than people, too. And there's enough research from Alma College and EGLE pointing to the county's CAFOs, or concentrated animal feeding operations, as being significant polluters of the water. In short, there could be too little soil for all their manure.

Though the folks at Healthy Pine River would like to avoid an adversarial relationship with the farming community. Sandro spoke about some of their outreach efforts, even some productive meetings in recent years. They're also beginning to work on grants that could further those collaborations. "There's a major focus on working with farm communities," Sandro said. "And we're excited about that."

The farmers are ideally responsible stewards of their own lands, so reinvigorating the Pine River could be a shared goal. A problem, however, exists because "state laws that guide livestock farms are excessive," Sandro said. "What we're allowing here is extreme. To the point where some folks have left Europe to come here and farm."

Farther upstream, near Riverdale, there are septic tank issues, as well. Some of that nasty stuff can seep into the river. Rayburn pointed out the toothless laws regarding septic systems in Michigan. After three counties got together, he said, "the public went wild saying you're not going to tell us what to do with our septic."

These are big problems in need of big-money solutions. Rayburn said one estimate for dredging even a small portion of Pine River ran a cool \$20 million. So now they're looking at large federal grants that they hope can make a difference. The good news is that the relatively young organization is continuously building on that learning base.

### Collective solutions

A lot of it is disheartening. Though no one on Sandro's porch wants to fall into the trap of believing that the river is too far gone. Yet they know it might take a bigger community to make a community difference. Rayburn would like to grow the organization from 350 to 500 members.

In addition to building that membership and crafting a known narrative about the importance of healthy rivers, the group knows they need to break down some barriers and find common goals. "The good news is we know the farming community wants to protect the community for our kids," Sandro said. "We're not going to solve it by ourselves; we're going to solve it together."

Rayburn said the cost of membership in the Healthy Pine River group, which meets the second Thursday of every month at the Alma Public Library, is just \$5 per year. Concerned citizens can learn more about it by visiting [www.healthypineriver.org](http://www.healthypineriver.org).



Board members from the Healthy Pine River organization, including (left to right) Chuck Sandro, Jane Keon, and Gary Rayburn, stand in front of a particularly unhealthy part of the Pine River in Alma.

## Homecoming Royalty

Greer and Leppien Reign at Alma



Trinity Greer was crowned Queen, and Sam Leppien, King, during Alma High School's Homecoming festivities last Friday. Trinity is the daughter of Vincent Greer and Gabrielle Pascoe. Sam is the son of Jeff and Stephanie Leppien.

Ithaca Crowns Sierakowski and Pratt



Named as the 2021 Homecoming King and Queen at Ithaca High School last Friday were Rachael Sierakowski and Chad Pratt. Rachael is the daughter of Doug and Misty Sierakowski, and Chad is the son of Chad and Jennie Pratt.