

## A WORD ON FINANCES

Interested citizens frequently ask how the Commission funds its projects and operations.

I explain that the Commission maintains two separate funds -- one for capital projects and flood mitigation work and another for administrative needs common to any organization.

Our capital project fund contains revenue from Kankakee watershed assessments and dollars from counties who opted to forgo the assessments. These monies are for flood mitigation and comprise about 94% of the Commission's expenditures.

A smaller fund contains revenue from a modest annual state appropriation, small county contributions established in 1977, and farm rents. These dollars -- which account for about 6% of Commission spending -- pay for staff costs, accounting, clerical needs, and education. This fund also stores the Commission's prudent flood reserve.

As always, never hesitate to review our work at [kankakeeandyellowrivers.org](http://kankakeeandyellowrivers.org).

Sincerely,



Scott D. Pelath  
Executive Director  
Kankakee River Basin and  
Yellow River Basin  
Development Commission



*Out-of-service bridge between Lake and Newton Counties following its partial removal (Aug. 2024).*

## COMMISSION CELEBRATES 2024; PLANS FOR 2025

At its year-end meeting in December, the Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission ("the Commission") reviewed its major 2024 accomplishments while funding essential flood mitigation projects for 2025.

"Despite three separate events of heavy precipitation last year, the Commission took another leap forward in its mission," said Commission Executive Director Scott Pelath. "We reconstructed another mile of a badly eroding Yellow River banks. We removed an old section of bridge that impeded waterflow and hauled out scores of obstructions. Best of all, we laid the plans for even bigger projects ahead.

This year, the Commission continued its work to reduce channel-clogging sediment originating from the Yellow River in Marshall and Starke Counties. The Commission also demonstrated that with the help of key partners like U.S. Sen. Mike Braun and the Norfolk Southern Railroad, ordinarily arduous tasks like removing unserviceable bridges were suddenly achievable.

"The Commission's work is starting to make a difference," said Marshall County Surveyor and Commission Secretary Craig Cultice. "Since we started coordinating efforts to remove obstructions like logjams, we are seeing signs of high-water events be a little less high and a little bit shorter in duration."

However, Commission members emphasized the need to continue the pace of change. In its 2025 budget, the Commission funded major

initiatives intended to improve the Kankakee watershed as a whole:

- \$1.1 million to stabilize two miles of eroding Kankakee banks in Jasper County
- \$870,000 to complete Phase III of Yellow River bank reconstructions
- \$400,000 to remove obstructions and maintain riverbanks
- \$200,000 to prepare the worksite to remove the old State Line Bridge in 2026

"Major Commission projects provide a watershed benefit for all eight counties," said Commission Treasurer Bill Crase of Starke County. "The planned State Line Bridge removal in particular will remove a recurring blockage for the flow of water from South Bend to Scheider.

"One day, I look forward to the bridge to be reassembled somewhere for the public's enjoyment -- just somewhere other than over the Kankakee River," added Crase.

In addition to the adoption of plans, Pelath noted the meeting marked the final one for Kankakee Commission member and longtime Jasper County Commissioner Jim Walstra, who is retiring at the end of the year.

"We're going to miss him in more ways than one," said Pelath. "No one has been a more unwavering advocate for the Kankakee River and the people he has served for decades."

## In this issue...

2025 Plans P.1

State Line Bridge P.2

Frequently Asked Questions P.4

Award and Overview P.5

## Historic bridge's removal could come in 2026; State Line Bridge is among logjam sites along Kankakee River

By Doug Ross | *Post-Tribune*

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The historic State Line Bridge along the Kankakee River has been attracting attention for decades. It's been attracting logjams, too, which can exacerbate flooding.

"It's just a real thorn in the side to those who care about the natural flow of water along the river," Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission Executive Director Pelath said.

"It's not the only problem bridge along the Kankakee River – there are some other ones – but it's certainly one of the top one or two bridges that pose an ongoing flood hazard," he said.

The agency has budgeted \$200,000 for 2025 to prepare the worksite for removing the bridge in 2026.

The commission removed a Norfolk Southern Railroad bridge near Schneider earlier this year.



Pelath said he has been working since his first day on the commission to get the State Line Bridge removed, but the effort predates his tenure there. "Many had been working on it before me," he said.

The bridge used to connect to Bridge No. 2 at Clay Street in Lake County, but now it's separated, so the State Line Bridge is now a standalone issue.

It has been closed to traffic for a quarter of a century, having been taken out of service in 1999, Pelath said.

"I've been gratified that people are generally in agreement that if you want to enjoy State Line Bridge as a historic relic, you don't want to enjoy it where it is," he said.



The commission plans to disassemble the bridge and number the parts so it could be reassembled elsewhere if some other entity wants to take that on. "I have a fairly good degree of confidence that there will be some interest in it," Pelath said. "There's a number of organizations and units of government that have an interest in that type of bridge for display."

Reassembling it elsewhere will take money and planning.

Removing the bridge from the Kankakee River will likely be done with cash the commission has on hand, rather than borrowing money for the work, Pelath said. However, its removal will require the permission of a large group of regulators.

“Whenever you’re working that close to the channel, and in this case in the channel, you’re going to have Indiana Department of Natural Resources Division of Water because you’re going to have construction or floodway requirements, even if it’s temporary. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, too, because it’s a navigable waterway. If you have any sort of discharges or temporary wetland impacts – anything put there would be temporary, just for removal purposes, and then removed – there’s still a process to go through. And because it’s likely a historic eligible bridge, you’re going to have the state historic preservation officer,” Pelath said. “But from a federal standpoint, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is sort of the lead agency for a lot of the other federal entities.”

“The good news is we start talking with regulators early on before applications are even submitted, so we have applications that are going to make sense to the agencies and to us and are recommended by our technical consultants,” he said. “We have a good early coordination process available to us. It’s pretty gratifying that those discussions are beginning because it means that you’re starting to have a project in view.”



The tentative plan, subject to regulatory approval, is to use a crane on each side so the bridge can be walked off the river before it’s disassembled and numbered, then stored responsibly elsewhere.

Pelath checked with Eagle Creek Township Board member John Jurs, who doesn’t know the age of the bridge but figures it was in place before the Kankakee River was straightened more than a century ago.

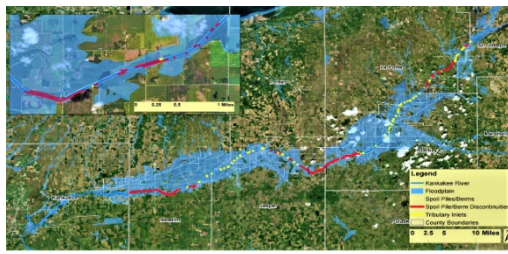
HistoricBridges.org lists the bridge as officially built in 1926, according to the National Bridge Inventory, but likely was there before then because of its design. “This bridge is an extremely rare example of one-lane pin-connected Pennsylvania through truss bridge,” the website says.

“There’s a railroad bridge just downstream of I-65,” Pelath said. “It’s not accessible by the public. I don’t know how old it is, but it’s in a 1908 photo.”

The supports are very close together, so they trap a lot of debris. But the trains using that bridge transport coal to the Schahfer Generating Station in Wheatfield, so it isn’t a candidate for quick removal.

“You can see plenty of bridges have been removed over the years if you go up and down the channel,” Pelath said. “A lot of those old concrete bridge supports, you see them all over the place.” A good example is where the Monon railroad crossed the river at U.S. 421, he said.

*Doug Ross is a freelance reporter for the Post-Tribune.*



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### ***Who started the Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission?***

The Indiana General Assembly passed legislation to form the Commission in 2019. Once Gov. Eric Holcomb signed the measure into law, the Commission came into being on July 1, 2019.

### ***What are the powers and duties of the Commission?***

Indiana Code 14-13-9-18 gives the Commission the ability to conduct 1) bank stabilization; 2) tree removal; 3) the construction and operation of sand traps; 4) channel reconstruction; 5) sediment removal; 6) acquisition, construction, and maintenance of access roads to levees and the channel of each river; and 7) other flood control actions considered necessary. The Commission may acquire interests in land, including easements, for the commission's use in providing flood storage and constructing levees or other flood control improvements. Any acquisitions are completely voluntary on the seller's part. The law also grants the Commission an exclusive, 75-foot easement from the top of each bank of the Kankakee and Yellow Rivers to conduct flood control and sediment management activities.

### ***Does the Commission have a long-term plan to address flooding and erosion?***

Yes. In September 2019, the Commission adopted a 40-year plan to address over a century of mounting flood and erosion problems. The state of Indiana funded the plan's development, and our neighbors in Illinois contributed to a share of the total cost. The full document is available for review at [kankakeeandyellowrivers.org](http://kankakeeandyellowrivers.org).

### ***How are we paying for flood control and sediment management projects?***

In 2019, the state of Indiana contributed \$2.3 million to begin work. After May 2021, capital projects will be funded by a limited annual assessment of properties within the Kankakee and Yellow River Basins. Under Indiana Code 14-13-9-21, these assessments are listed as \$7 per residential parcel; \$1 per farm acre; \$2 per undeveloped commercial acre; \$50 per commercial parcel; and \$360 per industrial or utility parcel. Funds are used for capital improvements, and Indiana workers and businesses are granted preferences for the work.

At any time, counties may choose to enact funding of their own as a substitute for these assessments. Otherwise, the amounts in state law took effect in January 2021.

## MISSION

*The Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission advances Northwest Indiana's safety, economic prosperity, and quality of its natural resources.*

## VISION

*The Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission is building a region where its residents, farms, and communities prosper in concert with one of the nation's most unique natural environments.*





## STATWIDE AWARD

The Commission has earned statewide honors for recent flood protection work along the Kankakee River.

At its annual conference in September, the Indiana Association for Floodplain and Stormwater Management (presented the Commission with its annual “Outstanding Floodplain Project Award” for its work to manageably contain floodwaters in the Kankakee watershed. The recognized work includes a series of engineered spillways and water control devices in Newton and Jasper Counties.

## KANKAKEE RIVER BASIN: AN OVERVIEW

- The Kankakee River Basin in Indiana consists of areas that drain to the Kankakee River and its major tributary, the Yellow River.
- Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Grand Kankakee Marsh was once the second-largest freshwater marsh in the United States.
- A measurable increase in major precipitation events, relentless sediment erosion, and an inefficient use of flood control assets have made the Kankakee and Yellow River channels increasingly difficult to manage.
- Precipitation volatility is predicted to continue, suggesting that a management strategy for economic vitality, sustainable agriculture, and our natural resources is necessary.
- Investments in the Kankakee River Basin are intended to reduce the future costs resulting from flood frequency and size.

