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FORREST CITY - Could a fishing and boating trail along the Lower Mississippi River be a good thing for St. Francis County? Some people think so.

A preliminary estimate has said that more than \$18 million a year would come into the Arkansas counties along the river and even those that are one county over from the river. "By no means are we promoting this as a panacea for solving all the economic issues of the Delta, but it is a good building block," said Gregg Patterson, with the American Land Conservancy land trust.

What is being proposed can happen, if a 1,500-acre island at Helena can be converted to public use.

Buck Island has been owned by the ALC since 2005, and may be donated to Phillips County if funding can be found by the end of this year.

"Phillips County is willing to be that public owner," said Patterson. "But as you well know, with Delta issues, there is no way Phillips County can pony up the money to purchase it."

The island will go on the private market after Dec. 31, if funding has not been found to make it public.

In the hoped-for scenario, Buck Island would link with Choctaw Island Wildlife Management Area at Arkansas City. It would also link with another island, Barfield Point, near Osceola and a fourth island, Blaker Towhead in Lauderdale County, Tenn., both of which are being eyed for public ownership.

Patterson said a group called the Lower Mississippi River Conservation Committee, made up of eight states on both sides of the Mississippi, is interested in creating the fishing and boating trail.

The ALC actually began work on the trail after the 1993 floods which occurred farther north up the Mississippi. Patterson said there are now 25,000 acres of public lands in Missouri and southwestern Illinois.

"With the success up north, they are moving down to begin the Lower Mississippi work, and right now are concentrating on Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee to get more islands, to get a trail that could actually start at St. Louis and go all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico," Patterson said.

He added that the asking price for the land is about \$1.1 million at this time. He said the idea was taken to the Arkansas Legislature during the last session.

"Both the House of Representatives and the Senate loved the idea, but as we all know, there are a whole bunch of good ideas that don't get funded," said Patterson. "That's why we're at this point - a last-minute buzzer shot, trying to cobble together enough partners to get it done."

He said the ALC will remain.

"We've got this Lower Mississippi project. We're here for the long haul," said Patterson.

"The ALC works like this: They buy a piece of property based on what they think the market will bear in regards to turning it into public land. They don't want to hang on to it much longer than two years, because then you're paying all of those taxes but not putting it to use. Then they take the money they get from the sale and go to the next island." He said the river used to be the center of life in the region, but much of that has been forgotten.

"I'd say there are third and fourth generations of people now, who know the river is there, they go over it on the Hernando DeSoto Bridge or whatever, but nobody goes there," said Patterson. "It's not like Mark Twain and 'Life on the Mississippi.' People have pretty much forgotten the river.

"But still, there are no locks and dams along this section of the river. It's a wild area still. You can see plenty of bear and deer," he said.

Patterson likened the proposed boating and fishing trail to the Appalachian Trail.

"It's like what the Appalachian Trail has done for hikers," he said. "There is a long trail from Maine to Georgia that brings hikers from all over the country and probably other places in the world. And this could literally be a river version of that."

In the meantime, the clock is ticking, and a private group in Memphis is ready to purchase the land, come Jan. 1.