

Indiana Department of Environmental Management

Lori F. Kaplan, Commissioner

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(Text does not include verbatim comments)

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be with you today.

It's a great day for me to be in Decatur County. Too often in my line of work, I speak to people about environmental matters that they might not want to hear about. Today, though, I have the pleasure to talk about good news. In fact, today we celebrate an environmental milestone in this county and our state.

There are a lot of places in Indiana that need IDEM's attention. In fact, choosing our priorities - which projects get our attention first - is something all of us at IDEM deal with day in and day out.

But, fortunately, a site here in Decatur County - the old Decatur County Landfill - won't be a problem that IDEM must continue to deal with. But, more importantly, the old Decatur County Landfill will no longer be a problem for the residents of Decatur County to deal with. You brought closure to this environmental problem yourselves. I am here today to personally congratulate the people - you - who made this happen. The Decatur County Landfill Steering Committee, under the leadership of Hugh Miller, is to be commended, congratulated, and thanked.

When I heard about the history of this site and the work you did, I was impressed. But the one aspect that captured my attention is the way the local industry and community worked cooperatively with IDEM to make it happen. You took responsibility for a serious environmental problem in your community and found a way to solve it. It has been my experience that the best solutions to local environmental problems are locally driven solutions.

A significant portion of what we do at IDEM is requiring people to do things that they might not want to do, or they don't think they can do. We have a lot of regulations and we spend a lot of time and resources seeing to it that people and businesses follow these regulations.

Because of all of your hard work and dedication to making this a clean and safe community, IDEM entered into an agreement with this steering committee to get the work done. That relieved IDEM of the possibility of having to go to court and spend significant resources on attorneys instead of fixing the problem.

Another aspect about the history of this project is that Decatur County taxpayers surely appreciate not footing the bill. Not only did you commit yourselves to do the right thing, you

found the money to match your commitment and you accomplished the task more quickly and efficiently than either the state or federal governments could have done it.

We often read about people raising money for enjoyable activities - like a new baseball field – or for events – like a centennial celebration. But rarely do you pick up the newspaper and read that a community raised \$750,000 to close a landfill.

I am here today to thank you personally for raising the money to make this project such a success. Your efforts not only set an example for other communities, but also are a testament that everyone's contribution makes a difference.

The Decatur County Steering Committee is true to its word of commitment. You didn't do just the quick and easy part. You took the time to properly close the old landfill and installed a leachate-collection system. The simple answer to this problem would have been to take the easy way out and let IDEM take the lead, but you stayed the course and, today, we are nearing the end of this project.

We are all here today because you are owed a debt of gratitude. Certainly from me, but also from the people of Decatur County and the State of Indiana. But more importantly, you are owed a debt of gratitude from people you and I will never know . . . future generations who will live, work and raise their families in this county. In short, you looked backward to see a problem while at the same time you moved forward to solve it. This has to be a great feeling!

Even while still basking in the glow of this job so well done, let me suggest we roll up our sleeves again and see what else we might do together to improve your county's environment, as well as Indiana's environment. IDEM has used your county's leadership as an example for other Hoosiers to follow and we are looking for more sites throughout Indiana where we can become partners with local leaders to help solve local environmental problems.

One initiative we at IDEM have worked hard at for the past two years is working with communities to address local environmental problems. This priority is known as Partnering for Livable Environments. It is one of four broad priorities for the agency. The other three include:

- Building a Better IDEM,
- Communicating Environmental Information and
- Reducing Exposure to Toxics.

I want to spend a few moments telling you about two of these priorities. The first, which I have already mentioned, is Partnering for Livable Environments.

Smaller communities often face unique hurdles when they approach environmental planning. To better understand the issues Hoosier communities face, we at IDEM have begun a pilot project forging relationships with two communities. The purpose of these partnerships is to assist these two communities in addressing environmental issues unique to them and their residents.

The pilot communities include Aurora in southeastern Indiana and New Harmony tucked away in the southwestern corner of Indiana.

These partnerships allow IDEM to work closely with the elected and civic leaders of Aurora and New Harmony. We quickly learned that what local residents need most to solve their environmental challenges is useful, how-to information and technical resources. And I believe that once a community is bolstered with good information, which is backed up with technical resources from the state, it will make good community-based decisions regarding environmental planning and solving its environmental challenges.

Something else we are doing to help communities find local solutions to their environmental problems is making information more accessible to them. This priority is called Communicating Environmental Information.

The legends of antiquity tell us that the great library at Alexandria in Egypt held all of the world's knowledge. That library burned while Julius Caesar was in Egypt and the world has never since known a collection of information its equal. Until, perhaps, today.

The Internet has changed our lives. With the use of e-mail, we can now communicate with hundreds of people at one time even if they are hundreds of miles away. And the World Wide Web has given us the ability to access all kinds of information.

At IDEM, we are making more and more information available on our Web site each day. We introduced our Web site five years ago.

Back then, which is a lifetime in this Information Age, IDEM's Web site offered about 400 pages of information. Today, we have thousands of folders containing tens of thousands of pages of information. And people are using our Web site. Let me give you an example of how powerful the Internet is as an information tool. I reported some comparative numbers for "Web hits" last fall to a legislative panel. I compared October 1998, 1999 and 2000. In October 1998, about 51,000 people looked at our site. A year later, that number almost tripled to 145,000 hits and in October 2000, about 249,000 visited our Web site.

The Web also allows IDEM to get news – sometimes, very important news – to people sooner. We send out news releases to local radio stations and newspapers using old technology . . . a FAX machine. This technology often allows radio and television stations to get this information out to the public quicker than the newspapers. But you can access this information even faster, because we also publish news releases to the Web and it is instantaneously available.

The depth of information is also greater than ever before. We have, during the 15 years of our existence - in fact, IDEM celebrates its 15th anniversary in just 12 days! We have created documents that are dozens and hundreds of pages long.

In the past, a person had to drive to Indianapolis to see a copy. Then, with the availability of copiers, someone could pay 25 cents a page and get a copy. But neither of those options made the document very accessible to the average Hoosier.

Today we can post those large documents to our Web site. With the click of a computer mouse, we can now download the whole document in a matter of a few seconds to our computer at home.

The key to cleaning up and protecting Indiana's environment lies not just with IDEM, the U.S. EPA or other state and federal agencies. It lies with all of us, as you folks have aptly demonstrated. I think the will exists among Indiana's cities, towns and counties and IDEM is stepping forward with the information and technical assistance local communities need to assume responsibility for their local environment.

And that's what we celebrate today . . . taking responsibility for your environmental security and health. The folks of Decatur County stepped up and took charge. They saw a problem that needed fixing and fixed it.

In closing today, I ask that you make this the beginning rather than the end.

I urge you to do even more for your community, become even more responsible for your environment and help spread the word to do what's right. Together, we can make a difference and the closing of this landfill is all the proof I need.

Thank you.