

\$28.5M plan is rolled out for Lynnhaven River

By [Scott Harper](#)
The Virginian-Pilot
© January 11, 2012

VIRGINIA BEACH

The Army Corps of Engineers laid out its plans for restoring the Lynnhaven River on Tuesday, telling the City Council that the project would include creating artificial oyster reefs made from concrete, rebuilding wetlands, and replanting underwater grasses then seeding them with sea scallops.

The strategy, hatched after eight years of study, is expected to cost \$28.5 million, with Virginia Beach paying about \$10 million.

Funding is not guaranteed at the city or federal level, however. And with budgets tight, chances the project gets under way any time soon remain iffy.

Council members, without committing to the city's share of the funding, expressed support for the plan and to continuing the revival of the city's largest waterway, on the mend after decades of pollution, overdevelopment and other abuses.

"Thank you for your work," Mayor Will Sessoms told corps scientists and managers after their presentation Tuesday. "We look forward to seeing more good results."

Clay Bernick, the city's sustainability director, said building about 31 acres of oyster reefs in the Lynnhaven should have a major side benefit: Because oysters are natural filters of nutrients and sediments, the city hopes to get credit for reducing these pollutants in meeting stricter new guidelines for cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay.

Investing in oyster reefs, Bernick said, would save taxpayers tens of millions of dollars that otherwise would be spent on high-tech controls needed to comply with the new Bay standards.

The standards are part of a drive by President Barack Obama's administration to hasten the Bay's cleanup by requiring mid-Atlantic states to significantly reduce nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment pollution by 2017 and 2025.

The Norfolk district of the Army Corps was instructed by Congress in 1998 to study the Lynnhaven River's many ailments and recommend remedies.

The work started in 2004 and is just about wrapped up, said Jeff Strahan, a regional economist who worked on the effort.

The study cost about \$3.2 million, a tab shared by the corps and the city.

It suggests installing 31 acres of concrete oyster reefs; eradicating 38 acres of lowlands covered by the invasive plant Phragmites, a type of reed, and replacing them with native wetlands; restoring 94 acres of underwater grass beds and dropping thousands of sea scallops on about 22 acres of those beds.

An earlier version of the plan recommended removing about 20 dams on the river to restore the natural rhythm of ebb and tide. But that was dropped after residents objected.

The river suffers from too much mud and silt shallowing its depths, too much bacteria tainting water quality, and too many nutrients reducing oxygen levels.

Karen Forget, executive director of Lynnhaven River Now, an environmental group, said the corps plan is a key blueprint for returning clean water and ample habitat to the waterway.

While wishing the study had not taken so long to complete, Forget said she looks forward to pushing City Hall and Congress to fully fund the restoration strategy.

"This gets us to where we need to go," she said.

Scott Harper, (757) 446-2340, scott.harper@pilotonline.com