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Watershed Development Commissions

Indiana Department of Natural Resources

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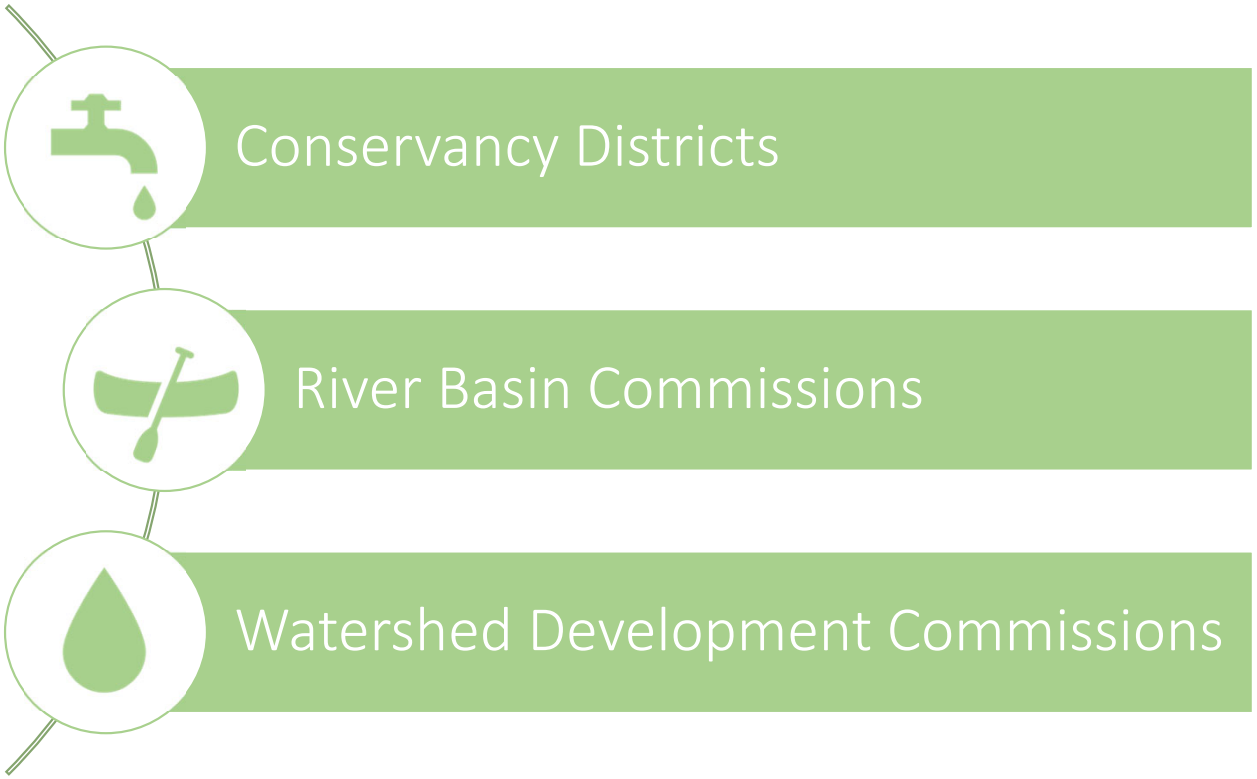
Watershed Stewardship Section



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River basin commissions were created to:

- Promote flood control
- Encourage soil and water conservation
- Improve water quality
- Increase cooperative planning and coordinated management of a basin's water and related land resources
- Support coordinated and cooperative action in the planning, development, and management of water resources

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Existing river basin commissions

- Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission (IC 14-13-9)
- Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission (IC 14-13-2)
- Maumee River Basin Commission (IC 14-30-2)
- St. Joseph River Basin Commission (IC 14-30-3)
- Upper Wabash River Basin Commission (IC 14-30-4)

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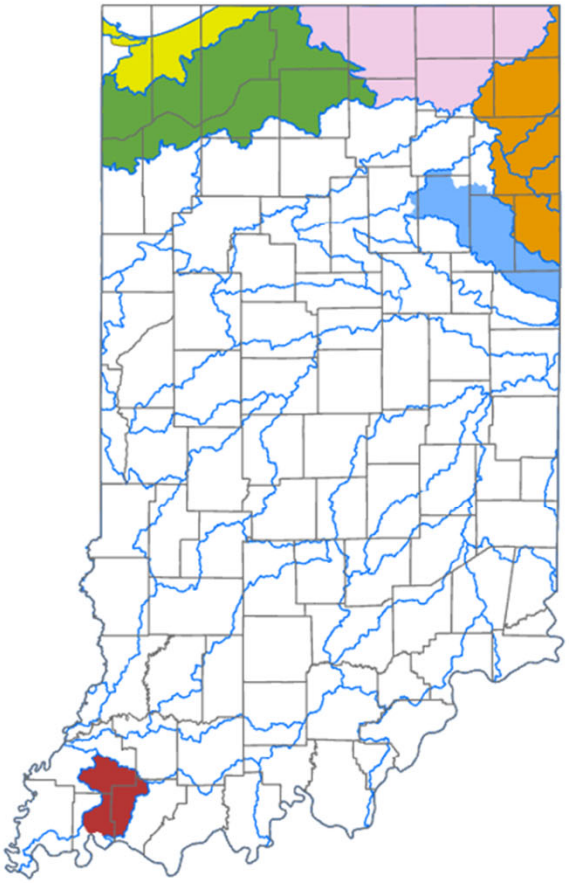
Watershed Stewardship
River Basin Commissions & Watershed Development Commissions Map



Legend

- Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission
- St. Joesph River Basin Commission
- Maumee River Basin Commission
- Upper Wabash River Basin Commission
- Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission
- Pigeon Creek Watershed Development Commission
- County Boundaries
- Hydrologic Unit Code 8

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Lil Calumet RBC

Lil Cal RBC serves as the required local sponsor for the Little Calumet River, Indiana Flood Control and Recreation Project. The Federal project, which was authorized for construction in the 1986 Water Resources Development Act, is designed to provide structural flood protection up to the 200-year level along the main channel of the Little Calumet River from the Illinois State Line to Martin Luther King Drive in Gary.

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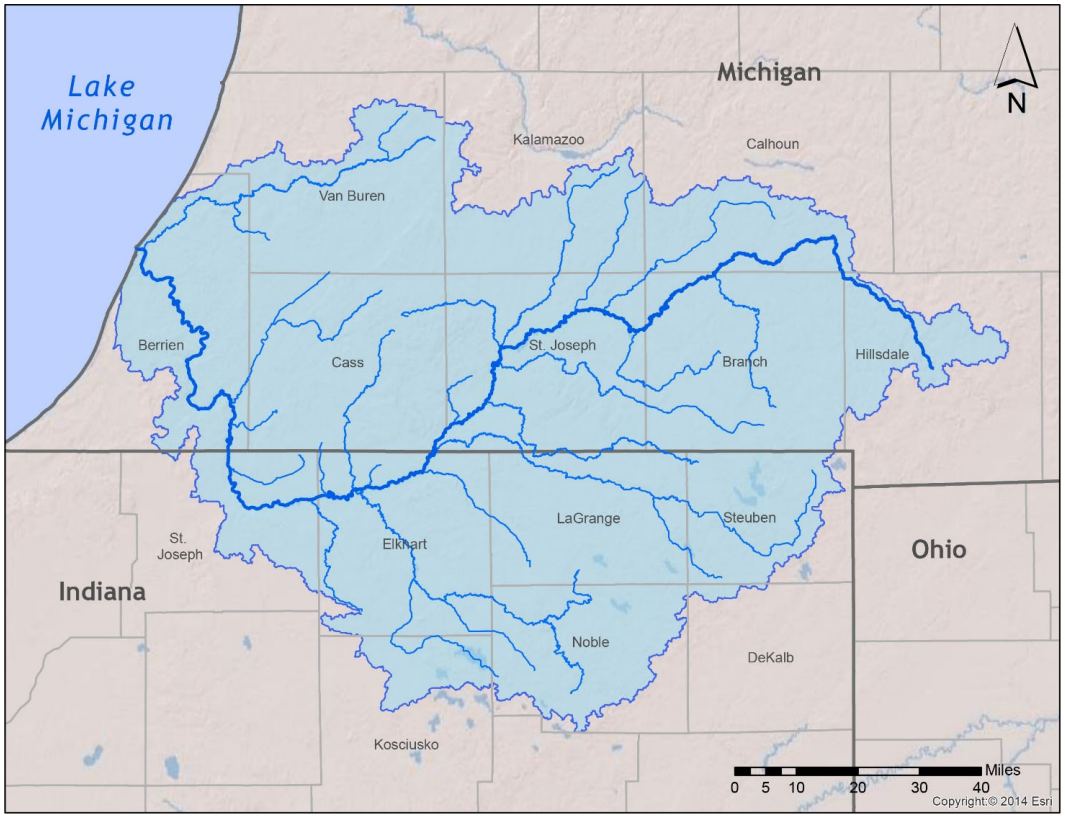
St. Joe RBC

The St. Joseph River Basin Commission (SJRBC) was established by the Indiana General Assembly in 1988 to improve water quality, encourage conservation and increase coordinated management of the water and related land resources within the St. Joseph River Basin. The governance and funding comes entirely from the Indiana portion of the basin, but the SJRBC is authorized to work with Michigan to improve water management throughout the watershed



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Maumee RBC

In 2001, MRBC entered Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Cooperating Technical Partner (CTP) Program and coordinates all Floodplain mapping activity in the Maumee River Basin. The Commission works closely with communities providing funding cost share assistance and guidance on flood mitigation projects.

Background

What is a Watershed Development Commission?

- Passed in 2023 by the Indiana General Assembly
- Allows local officials to create an entity with taxing authority to finance and coordinate water management activities
- Organized at the HUC-8 scale* with the ability to undertake certain activities for the benefit of the watershed
- Cannot overlap an existing river basin commission or watershed development commission
- Created and run by elected officials

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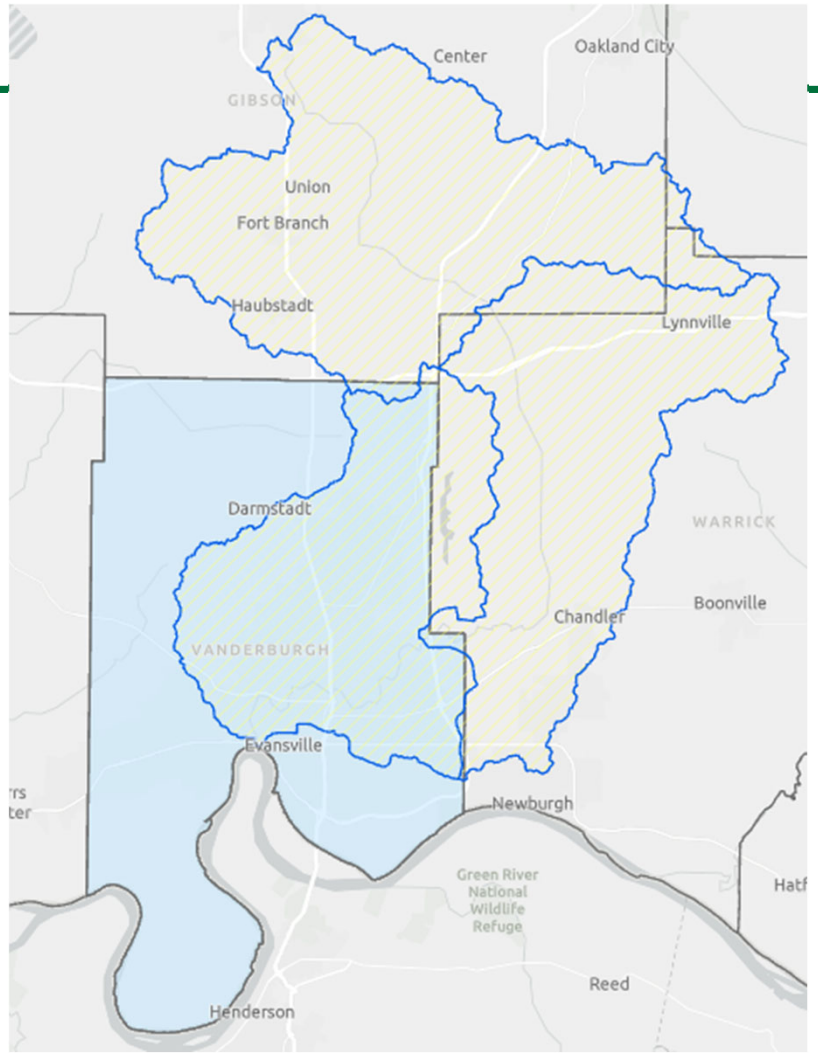
Pigeon Creek WDC

The first watershed development commission established in Indiana under IC 14-30.5

Established October 2024

Vanderburgh County is the only “member” so far



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The purposes of a watershed development commission:

- Flood damage reduction
- Drainage
- Stormwater management
- Recreation
- Water infrastructure (NOT drinking water or wastewater)
- Water quality improvements*

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Funded through special assessment

Parcel Type	Max cost per year
Residential	$7
Agriculture	$1/acre
Commercial w/o structure	$2/acre
Commercial with structure	$50
Public Utility	$360
Industrial	$360

Brings in ~ $550,000 Annually

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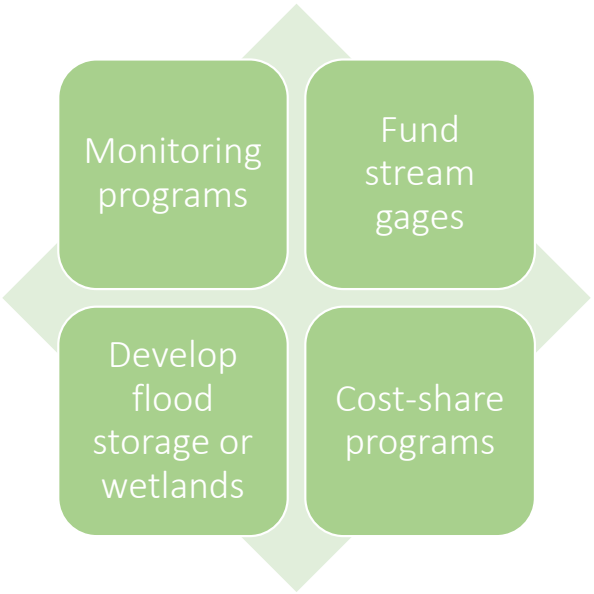
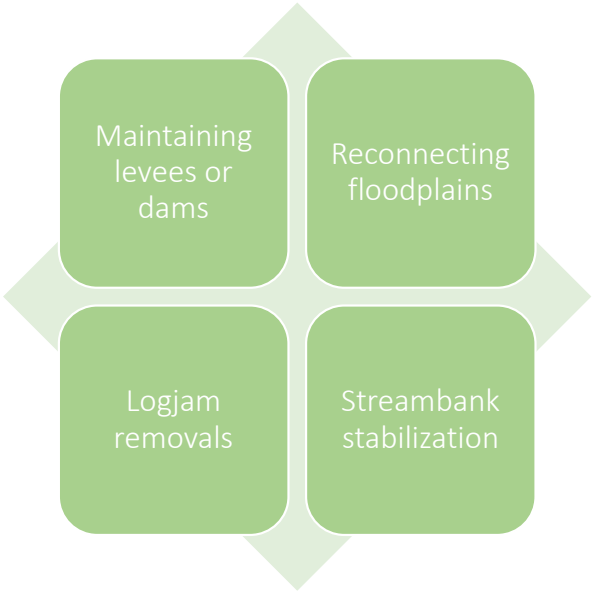
A watershed development commission is allowed to raise funds and complete activities related to its purposes





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Partnerships will be key to success!

- Interlocal Agreements
- Advisory Committees
- Stakeholder Input
- Multi-County Coordination

How To Form One

Watershed Development Commissions

- Counties proposing a new WDC must have at least 10% of the surface of the designated watershed within the county
- County Commissioners must submit an ordinance that meets statutory requirements
- The Natural Resources Commission will review the submission and either approve or deny recognition of the proposed WDC based on a series of factors

What You Need To Prove/Provide

Watershed Development Commissions

- Watershed scale size – HUC 8
- Purposes
- A record of what studies/plans have been done - written technical, financial, photographic, historical narrative, evidence and analysis
- Will it address the needs?
- What the WDC will do - how will they accomplish their purpose
  - Budget Plan
- Letters of Support *

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A county can join an existing watershed development commission at any time.

They will need to:

1. Adopt an ordinance
2. Will need to be approved by the Natural Resources Commission

Once they join a WDC, they get representation on the board (unless they have less than 10% of the watershed in their county)**

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After establishment.....

Should develop a flood damage reduction and drainage plan

Develop a water quality plan if focusing on water quality. Cannot enforce water quality; only create goals

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What are we working on?

Logjam Coordination

CBB

Developing a flood damage reduction and drainage plan (work plan)

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What are we working on?

Streamgage Installation

Identifying potential property to purchase

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How Are They Funded?

Watershed Development Commissions

- Annual special assessment up to a certain amount
  - Counties can reduce the tax amount depending on the needs of the WDC
  - Counties may decide to not add tax and instead use other funding mechanisms
- A WDC may receive direct support from the member counties of the WDC, but the direct support must equal at least 90% of the amount that the WDC would otherwise receive from annual special assessments.
- WDCs may also receive grants.

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How Are They Funded?

Watershed Development Commissions

- The intent was for parcels to not get “double-taxed” by a watershed development commission and legal drain.
- We followed up with SBOA, they said that it would be unknown to them if special assessments could be collected on both for WDC fees and legal drain fees.
- The statute is pretty vague and there is some language in the statute that looks like you potentially could collect fees (IC 14-30.5-5-1), and that they should not go over the max amounts. Our recommendation is that you consult with a lawyer.

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Funding Caps

Watershed Development Commissions

Parcel Type	Max cost per year
Residential	$7
Agriculture	$1/acre
Commercial w/o structure	$2/acre
Commercial with structure	$50
Public Utility	$360
Industrial	$360

Funding Caps Cont.

Watershed Development Commissions

- If the full amount of the assessments is not needed, the board can pass a resolution to lower the rate across the board by a percentage
- The board shall set the reduction percentage so as to produce revenue expected to be sufficient to meet the anticipated financial needs of the watershed development commission in the approaching calendar year.
- Example: 20% reduction

Parcel Type	Original	20% Reduction
Residential	$7	$5.6
Agriculture	$1/acre	$0.80/acre
Public Utility	$360	$288

Governance

Watershed Development Commissions

1. Director of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) or their designee,
2. The county surveyor of each member county,
3. A second county representative appointed by the county executive,
4. An individual appointed to represent each second class city within each member county
   - If there are no second class cities within the county, an individual representing the municipality with the highest population within each member county.

- Must appoint an Executive Director

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Who Are We?

Hired Executive Director in July 2025

Board Members Include:

- Department of Natural Resources
- Vanderburgh County Surveyor
- Former Vanderburgh County Commissioner
- Evansville MS4 Coordinator

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How are they structured?

- Voting members of the WDC board will elect a chair, vice chair, and secretary-treasurer who will have one-year terms and eligibility for reelection.
- The board will also appoint an executive director of the commission.
- WDCs must establish an advisory committee and may have ad hoc committees.
- Need to consider legal, accounting, and insurance needs

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Powers of a WDC

Exclusive authority to perform drainage and flood damage reduction activities within the channel and the area extending 75 feet from the top of each bank of the river of the WDC designated watershed.

- Bank stabilization
- Tree removal
- Construction and operation of sand traps
- Channel reconstruction
- Sediment removal
- The acquisition, construction, & maintenance of access roads to levees and the channel
- Other actions that the board of the WDC reasonably considers necessary

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Benefits of a Watershed Development Commission

- Can provide a steady source of funding
- Can tackle water quantity and quality issues
- Can address the whole watershed
- Can work across state lines with agencies on the other side of the border within the same watershed
- Provides opportunities for water technicians and SWCDs to provide expert input on issues facing the watershed

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Challenges of a Watershed Development Commission

- People don't like it when they have to pay more
- The board may become too large or small to manage effectively
- The governing board may not include key stakeholders
- Partnerships will be needed to be effective
- Boundaries could be too large to effectively address all stakeholder concerns

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Have questions?

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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dnr.IN.gov/water/watershed-stewardship-section
https://www.in.gov/dnr/water/watershed-stewardship-section/watershed-development/