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Ag secretary Northey visits Cedar Falls

By **MATTHEW WILDE**
Courier Staff Writer

CEDAR FALLS — Water trickled down Hudson Road Thursday into storm drains carrying oil, anti-freeze and other contaminants.



Bill Northey

Most likely the runoff will end up in area waterways. Conservationists say the warm winter day accelerating the snow melt is the perfect time to request funding for an expert to reduce urban pollution. The metro area needs an urban conservationist and members of the Black Hawk County Soil and Water Conservation District made sure Iowa's top agricultural official knows it.

Bill Northey, Iowa Secretary of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, visited the University of Northern Iowa Museum, located on Hudson Road, Thursday morning as part of his quest to meet and listen to

Iowans in every county. But instead of talking about record grain prices, livestock or the state's booming ethanol industry, the majority of the conversation focused on conservation — particularly in towns.

"The creeks are our drainage systems," said Sherman Lundy, conservation district treasurer.

Of the 13 people who attended the town hall meeting, several were either county soil and water commissioners or work for the Natural Resources Conservation Service. After Northey explained the various divisions within the ag department, the conservationist went to work.

Lundy told the secretary farmers are making progress implementing conservation practices to improve soil and water quality. That is not surprising, he said, since financial and technical resources are more readily available for rural areas. That is what most Iowans think of when conservation is mentioned.

That is only half the battle, conservationists say. Urban areas contribute to soil and

chemical runoff as well, and Lundy says an expert is needed to help Waterloo and Cedar Falls combat the problem.

"I would like your support to put an urban conservationist here," Lundy said, asking for \$35,000 to \$50,000 from the state's ag budget to help pay for salary and benefits. "We all know the watershed doesn't end at the city limits."

While Northey didn't shoot down the idea, he said getting more money this year when financial cuts to the ag department are expected is unlikely. Four urban conservationists and one supervisor are already deployed throughout the state, with the closest to the Cedar Valley in Iowa City.

Urban conservationists specialize in helping property owners in town build or find funds to construct such things as rain gardens, permeable paving (allowing water to infiltrate the ground), vegetative filter strips and backyard conservation and wildlife improvements — all meant to keep contaminants from running off of lawns and pavement to waterways.

"This is definitely important ... but the dollars are not going to come from this (legislative) session," Northey said. "It's fair to say nonrural legislators think of conservation just in rural areas. That's why we have to let folks know way conservation matters to them."

For example, Dry Run Creek that runs through Cedar Falls is so polluted aquatic life can't survive in it. The local conservation district received a \$500,000 grant in 2005 to help clean up the stream. That helped, but conservationists say permanent funding is needed to be truly effective.

Local contributions would also be needed to help pay for urban conservation projects, meeting participants said, while they want to state to fork over for an expert oversee them.

"In our area people support (conservation)," said Kathy Scholl, an assistant commissioner. "We just need the state to put money into this area."

Contact Matthew Wilde
at (319) 291-1579 or
matt.wilde@wccourier.com.