



## Group eyes fish plant for Grafton

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GRAFTON — If you can't beat 'em, eat 'em.

So says Ben Allen, a businessman and attorney, when he voices his solution to the area's growing Asian carp problem.

"We can build a prototypical plant right here in Grafton to process and retail the fish for consumption," Allen said. "That can allow entrepreneurs to see that there is a market for this. We are sitting on an oil well if we can find a use for these things."

Allen is one of five founding members of Grafton Summit Enterprises LLC, a group of local businessmen committed to keeping the Asian carp population explosion from destroying Grafton's fishing industry. Allen says up to 80 percent of fish caught in the Mississippi River are "silverfins," the name that has been given to the carp in an attempt to change its perception.

"This is killing the fishing industry in Illinois," he said. "Ten years ago, we could go out and pull in 10,000 pounds of fish; of that, we would have a mixture of catfish and buffalo. Now, we can still bring in 10,000 pounds, but 80 percent of it will be the silverfins. Fisherman can't make a living if they can only sell 20 percent of their take.

The Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant will hold a "fish summit" today and Tuesday at Lewis and Clark Community College. Allen will be attending, along with renowned chef Philippe Parola, who is visiting the area this week to try and sell the idea of the carp as a delectable delicacy.

"I have what I call the Asian carp invasion solution," Parola said. "Right now it is considered trash, and that is a ridiculous assumption. We are trying to put this fish on the market, and it hurts our plans when there is a negative image out there."

Parola, a world-renowned chef with his own culinary school, television series, and line of gourmet accessories, has developed a method of deboning and cooking the carp, creating a delicacy he says is pleasing to the palate.

"There is no such thing as a bad fish," he said. "Fishermen eat whatever they catch. I wanted to find a solution that would work to everyone's advantage."

Parola's long-term plan includes a series of processing plants based along the Mississippi River with the purpose of catching the silverfins, processing and packing them, and shipping them off to be sold retail across the country, possibly even overseas.

"Let's keep our money here, create jobs, and solve an ecological problem," he said.

That is where Allen's group comes in. The investors, consisting of Allen, business owner and fisherman Oliver Ready of Ready's Fish Market, construction and food code expert Bryan LeBeau, and Roger Crone, who has an extensive background in production line knowledge and maintenance, want to build a plant near the river in Grafton to process and sell the fish.

The group has its eye on an old 13,000-square-foot warehouse on Route 3 previously used to store produce.

Allen said the building needs plumbing, electric and new flooring, but the walls are well insulated.

"Major work needs to be done to the building, but this building has already been used in the food industry, so that puts us ahead of the game," Allen said.

Allen said the estimated cost to open the plant would be between \$2.5 and \$3.5 million, and the building is scheduled to be annexed to the city of Grafton within the next month.

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