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'Hotel' hopes to lure fish back to downtown

BY MONIFA THOMAS Staff Reporter

At this hotel, the clientele is slippery, and they're likely to leave without paying.

The city's first "fish hotel," dedicated Saturday at the Michigan Avenue bridge, is a self-contained fish habitat designed to help replenish the Chicago River's fish population by providing food, shelter and protection in areas where such necessities are limited.

It's a three-month experiment to see if fish "in areas with steep walls and little or no habitat can utilize a created natural setting to thrive," said Margaret Frisbie, executive director of Friends of the Chicago River, the nonprofit organization behind the pilot program.

The hotel is a combination of floating and submerged islands anchored to the steel walls lining the river. Islands are planted with wetland vegetation that will provide shelter and attract insects and other food for a variety of fish species.

Another feature of the hotel will be a kiosk connected to underwater cameras that will allow pedestrians on the riverwalk to view the fish and read about what's going on beneath the surface.

'A glimpse into river life'

"It is a win-win for fish and people," said project lead Geoff Deigan, of WRD Environmental, the hotel's designer. "The fish get this lush haven, and people gain a glimpse into river life."

Located at the southwest corner of the Michigan Avenue Bridge, the fish hotel is one of the first projects being done through the city's Adopt a River Downtown program, which recruits businesses to donate to cultural programs and river improvement projects.

If the pilot is successful, more fish hotels could be placed on the river's North Branch and ultimately, other cities, Frisbie said.

"We're hoping this could be a model for any urban river situation," she said.