

Things that have been found floating in the Potomac River: a vintage Chevy. A giant plastic hot dog. A tombstone from 1878. A \$50 check to the Internal Revenue Service.

And more than 2.5 million pounds of other trash.

The Potomac River, to put it nicely, is kind of a mess. But an eclectic group of political leaders, environmentalists and citizen groups — including Reps. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) — have joined together in a pledge to clean up the river by 2013.

“It’s very important for this region that we clean up the Potomac,” Van Hollen said. “I think when we see the trash, the tires, the plastic bags, the cans that have accumulated, it’s a sign of neglect.”

Van Hollen and Hoyer joined eight Washington, D.C., metropolitan area jurisdictions and several local and regional leaders last week when they signed the Potomac Watershed Trash Treaty, which sets a goal of cleaning the river completely in seven years.

“This initiative marks a critical step in the ongoing efforts to improve the health of the Potomac and enhance the overall quality of life of those who live within its watershed,” Hoyer said in a statement.

Cleaning up the Potomac by 2013 might sound like a lofty task, but those leading the effort believe it will happen.

The treaty is sponsored by the Alice Ferguson Foundation, a nonprofit group that has been holding cleanup events and educational efforts for the Potomac River since 1989.

“There’s just been tremendous interest in the idea of having a focused, collaborative effort to address the trash issue in the region,” said Tracy Brown, founder and executive director of the foundation. “It’s something that we can all relate to. It’s something we can all see.”

Signers of the treaty pledge to support and implement strategies to reduce trash and increase recycling, increase awareness of the trash issue throughout the Potomac Watershed and meet each year to evaluate the cleanup's progress, according to the foundation.

Van Hollen will chair the advisory council of the initiative, which will come up with the action plan to clean up the river — and keep it clean.

The council will be supported by five action committees that will look at legislative, technical, economic and public education solutions to the issue.

"It's one thing to get it cleaned up by 2013, get rid of the trash," Van Hollen said. "It's another thing to keep it that way."

In perhaps a note of how significant the issue has become, the World Bank will sponsor the Potomac Watershed Trash Summit on March 16, providing a place for the entire region to address the trash issue, Brown said.

An action plan for 2006 will be presented at this time, Brown added, and each jurisdiction will take on a piece to implement.

Businesses, civic leaders and residents will all be asked to sign a pledge to do their part to clean the river, Brown said.

Brown added her group will likely present case studies of other cities that have undertaken successful river cleanups at the summit, providing potential ideas of just how to get the job done.

"It's an issue whose time has come," Brown said. "I think something's going to happen. I feel

optimistic that we are going to have a trash-free Potomac.”

Tied into the cleanup of the river, along with cleanup of the nearby Anacostia River, are efforts to revitalize much of the District’s neglected neighborhoods, many of which are adjacent to the rivers, Van Hollen said.

“This will help spur that effort,” he said. “No one wants to develop an area that’s covered with trash.”

While cleaning the river is a challenge, Brown believes public support for the effort is clear. Her group’s annual cleanup day attracts from 5,000 to 6,000 people each year, she said.

And helping people understand that they can do simple things to help keep the Potomac clean will be important, Van Hollen said.

“For example, a lot of people don’t know where to take their used tires,” he said.

Once the community joins together and makes the cleanup of the Potomac and nearby Anacostia a priority, the river will get cleaned up, Brown said. It’s too important an issue not to address, she said.

“It’s the lifeblood of the nation’s capital. It’s the lifeblood of the people who live here,” Brown said. “This is the nation’s river.”