

French River Log

Volume 1 Number 1

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Welcome to the inaugural edition of the French River Log, the newsletter of the French River Connection. We plan to publish this newsletter quarterly to keep our communities current on our activities. We hope you find it useful.

2005 in Review

The French River Connection will be one year old this month. 2005 was a busy year for us. Here are some of the highlights:

Using equipment provided by the Webster Lake Association, and with the guidance of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection and the Blackstone River Coalition, we initiated a Water Quality Monitoring program. We monitored eight sites from the Connecticut state line to south Oxford, between five and eight times each. Our results are presented in a report available on our website. A similar program is planned for 2006.

We cleaned up about 2.5 mile of shoreline. On the west side of the river, we cleaned from the Oxford town line to the North Main Street bridge, and from the Packard Pond outflow to the state line. On the east side, we cleaned from Mill Brook to Mill Street, from the Chase Avenue bridge

to Hill Street, and from the southern boundary of the wastewater treatment plant to the state line. Cleanup activities will continue in 2006.

In June, we began a shoreline survey with a training session presented by the Massachusetts Riverways program. The river, between Greenbriar Park and the state line, was divided into twelve sections and teams assigned to survey and document the in-stream and river corridor conditions. Eight of the twelve sections were surveyed at least once. The end result of the survey will be an action plan based on the findings and recommendations of the surveyors.

In October, senior Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning students from the University of Connecticut, with guidance from staff at the Green Valley Institute, began identifying concepts to revitalize the riverfront in Webster and Dudley. The work began with a public charrette, and results were presented to the communities in December. A report based on their findings is available on our website.

During 2005, we undertook a program of advocacy with state and federal officials for the repair and proper operation of North Village Dam. This has resulted in a commitment by the

owner to undertake some improvements.

We submitted three grant proposals in 2005, one of which was rejected and another of which will not be decided until June. We were successful in obtaining \$1700 from the Greater Worcester Community Foundation Land and Water Stewardship Fund for cleanups, documentation of our shoreline survey results, and production of materials from the riverfront revitalization study.

We identified some parcels of riverfront land in need of protection, and consulted with various agencies about how that might be done.

We began to address navigability issues for paddling the river by clearing a channel of downed trees below the Chase Avenue bridge.

2006 promises to be an even busier year.

River Protection Act 101

The Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions publishes a great handbook which enables those of us who don't want to wade through Massachusetts General Laws to get an idea of what protections are in place for the state's rivers. (over)

These protections are provided by the Rivers Protection Act of 1997, and are administered by local Conservation Commissions. The act creates a riverfront area 200 horizontal feet in extent from the mean high water mark, and with few exceptions applies to any perennial stream. The riverfront area is presumed to have the following values, and it is up to project proponents to prove otherwise:

- protection of water supplies
- protection of groundwater
- flood control
- storm damage prevention
- protection of shellfish
- protection of fisheries
- protection of wildlife habitat

These values are interpreted for rivers on factsheets located at <http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/river/resources/riverfactsheets.htm>

Projects within the riverfront area must undergo an economic analysis proving that there is no viable economic alternative to the project, and they must have no significant impact on the riverfront area. "No significant impact" means:

Alteration of no more than 10% of the riverfront area, or 5000 square feet, whichever is greater, may be allowed. The project must provide a minimum of 100 feet of undisturbed vegetation, and if it's not present, preserve and

extend what there is. Stormwater must be managed in full compliance with DEP guidance. Wildlife habitat capacity, vernal pools, and water quality may not be impaired. There are some exemptions, the same ones that apply to wetlands, and additionally, projects on land occupied by historic mill complexes are exempt. Similarly, there are certain "limited" projects that may be authorized, including paths for non-motorized use along the riverfront.

Different standards are applied to previously developed or degraded areas in order to encourage positive re-use. New work cannot be nearer the river than existing work. It cannot exceed the degraded area it replaces or 10% of the riverfront area, whichever is greater. Necessary restoration work to remove debris or reduce runoff is allowed. Developers who wish to exceed these limits may propose mitigation in the form of river protection at another site in a ratio of 2:1

What can you do? Watch the media for Conservation Commission hearings for projects in the river corridor. Attend and speak up if it appears the river is not being afforded its full protection. Ensure that burdens of proof are on the project proponents and that Conservation Commissioners exercise the full extent of their authority. If you

observe a project underway that appears to not be in compliance, ask about it. Conservation Commissions can issue a "cease and desist" order.

Meeting Schedule

The French River Connection meets at 7pm on the second Wednesday of every month at rotating locations. Here is the schedule for 2006:

Dudley Town Hall Rm 210:
Mar 8, Jun 14, Sep 13, Dec 13

Hodges Village Dam, Oxford
Apr 12, Jul 5, Oct 11

Webster, location TBD
May 10, Aug 9, Nov 8

Cleanups

The Dudley town cleanup arranged by the Board of Health is scheduled for April 22, with the Webster town cleanup to be scheduled by the Recycling Commission to follow shortly. We will participate in both of these, and recruit other groups to do so. Watch for further announcements.

We need your help

If you would like to help us with our work, come to a meeting, call us at (508) 943-2698, or email frenchriver@charter.net. Everyone is welcome.