

## **Blackstone River Users' Conference II**

**September 22, 2010**

**Blackstone Valley Visitor Center**

**Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development Laboratory**

**Host: Bob Billington, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council**

Billington opened the conference and explained that the purpose of this Second Blackstone River Users' Conference was to bring together interested parties that share an interest in the future of the Blackstone River. There may be competing interests, but he noted that we are more aligned than we think. Last year's Conference developed Outcomes around five topics. He explained that the Outcomes were not edited. This year we want to put our finger on the pulse; to see progress on the topics of concern that were identified last year. He reminded the audience that all of the issues that were important in 2009 were just as important in 2010. Today's agenda has subtracted a few topics and added a few. We have a story to tell, an authority to tell it and a birth responsibility to care for the Blackstone River.

### **Points of alignment:**

- Make the River more fishable and swimmable.
- Find a way to maintain the river. We have great volunteers, but no statutory support or programs. Maintenance is done through the good will of the Friends of the Blackstone, the Keep the Blackstone Beautiful program and other programs of the Blackstone River Coalition.
- Recreational safety at Dams. Should safety procedures be aligned?
- Needs to be accessible.
- Make it a Safe River – the Safest River to enjoy.
- Expand Recreational Use.

**Keynote Speaker: Curt Spalding, US EPA Region I Director**

Mr. Spalding was appointed as EPA Region 1 (6 New England States) Director in December. Region 1 and Region 3 (Mid-Atlantic States) are unusual in that they get more actively involved in issuing permits.

Director Spalding opened his remarks by citing the need for **Whole System Thinking**. It is critical that the public and private sectors get traction on all the problematic issues. It is all about

**“Urban Stuff”:** water, air, urban places... Ira Magaziner (a former Clinton advisor and Brown graduate) quoted – “it is about what happens to cities such as Providence and Worcester. What sustains these cities; what makes cities work.”

There is a need for a long-term **Urban Sustainability Network**. We want to make a difference in Urban Sustainability. We must get a systemic act together. We must empower networks and we must get people talking. This should be the catalyst for moving forward. The Blackstone Valley already has that in the Corridor and the Tourism Council.

USEPA has new tools and techniques in its toolbox. Different tools work in different places, but a functioning dialog between all the parties is essential.

There is a challenge in Washington. Will we be able to defend the Clean Air Act regulations? Deficit issues and the FY 12 budget will be extremely tough. Will there be a freeze in spending?

**There is a need to break down the silos!** We have a great opportunity to make it happen right here in the Blackstone Valley. For example, it is no secret that Worcester has had a hard time issuing wastewater and storm water permits. The issue is the **nutrients**. There is no disagreement regarding bacteria; no debate. There is a commitment to deal with that. The problem lies in having to deal with both phosphate and nitrate. The permit has gone through the first phase of appeal. It was sustained except for the co-permittee issue. We are at the final stages of that play. Now Worcester has to decide whether to take it to Court, where the burden of proof will be harder to overcome. We are engaged in a discussion and will be sitting down and starting to talk about compliance. Grinding through these issues will be pretty hard. New techniques for water treatment are needed. Worcester is a big deal and Director Spalding has made the solution a personal mission.

In the Charles River watershed EPA has issued under RDA authority the need for sites with impervious cover greater than two acres to reduce the polluting effect of runoff. Franklin, Milford and Bellingham are the MA communities involved and they have complained that by doing this to them it should be done everywhere if we are to be consistent. What is needed is an accountable Storm Water permit similar to what exists in EPA's Region 3. We have good enough models to develop a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for impervious cover. An infusion of new “green infrastructure” i.e. Rain Gardens, Rain Barrels is needed to address the storm water challenge. Tools and techniques are needed to get storm water back into the ground.

All watersheds need to be made more resilient in order to be able to withstand what is coming. More intense rainstorms are to be expected due to climate change. All six New England States are in the top ten states with more intense rain events. This Spring 3,000 people lost their jobs in Warwick and Cranston within 12 hours of the flood. We need to look at utilities, storm water and drinking water. Can we soften the watershed and get the water into the ground? We need to deal with historic sediments. This is a huge challenge to all who want to use rivers for good. In RI the Water Response Team was able to quickly respond. Also, Ken Payne and the RI State

Energy Office are looking at all 10 treatment plants.

It is time to push the envelope on storm water. Worcester will be the first storm water permit issued. Remember **Sustainability**. It is what our cities and towns need. The Regional Plan Agency in NY has analyzed climate change and predicts that New England will have water when other areas will be drying up.

**Question:** How do you influence RI to implement MA storm water focus?

Concept of work sharing with states. Can't worry about what you don't know.

**Question:** How committed is EPA to the goal of achieving fishable/swimmable standards?

It is a shared responsibility. MA will issue the permits; a consent agreement will be created. The process needs to go through the legal ramifications. Can we stop fighting about this? MA and EPA's relationship was strained. Systemic issues – funding cuts. Constrained by the process. Worcester is saying in effect, we are going to challenge you at every stage.

**Question:** The Blackstone Valley applied for a **Sustainable Communities Initiative**, thinking to teach the nation and was heartily encouraged to apply, but could not convince the Feds to fund the grant. Why?

The Sustainable Community Partnership program is new. Question existed as to what regional entities could apply for the grant. Fitting a square peg into a round hole. The real opportunity is to get Providence and Worcester talking; get the Urban Agenda develop.

## **SPEAKERS:**

### **River Water Quality – Donna Williams, Blackstone River Coalition**

The Blackstone River Coalition is a group of organizations whose mission is to achieve fishable/swimmable standards in the Blackstone by 2015. Our two major issues are Nutrients and Storm water.

There are challenges to water quality from the start with a large treatment plant on a small river, which is impacted by the runoff from a hilly city. The Upper Blackstone has completed its upgrades and is very close to reaching the new standards sought in the 2008 permit. In dealing with storm water impacts the key issue is to interrupt the connected chain of impervious surfaces. The watershed is dealing with ever-increasing amounts of runoff and the impacts this has on waterways, with the resulting flashy hydrograph, with higher highs and lower lows. Impacts are evident once the percentage of impervious cover in the watershed reaches 10%, even greater than 4% impervious cover will impact cold water fisheries. Impervious cover also effect groundwater recharge, water supplies and stream flow. Our program of tackling Storm water addresses 4 audiences: Local Decision Makers; Homeowners; Developers/Builders; & Businesses and municipalities.

The BRC conducts monthly water quality sampling using volunteers at more than 60 sites under an approved Quality Assurance Plan. Working with municipalities we have encouraged demonstration projects such as the EPA funded Storm water Park at Fisherville in Grafton. The BRC has printed outreach materials for homeowners to build rain gardens and disconnect rooftop runoff, and through the In-Business for the Blackstone Program have identified local businesses who have taken voluntary measures to reduce the impact of storm water from their site.

### **Wastewater Treatment – Christine Comeau, Narragansett Bay Commission**

The NBC is a quasi-State Agency that operates two large Waste Water Treatment Facilities in RI: Bucklin Point & Field's Point. Ten municipalities are in the service area with a population of 360,000 and 8,000 commercial/industrial users.

NBC conducts fecal monitoring at 18 sites once a week; the 2 sites on the Blackstone are at Lonsdale Avenue and Slater Mill. At Slater Mill the fecal results exceeded the maximum of 200 mpn in five of the seven years of testing; at Rte 122 200mpn (most probable number/100 milliliters) was exceeded three out of seven years.

The River Nutrient Monitoring Program was started in 2005 with 4 purposes:

1. Evaluate sources of nutrient loading coming from RI and MA urban rivers that empties into Upper Narragansett Bay;
2. Gather data for TMD

3. Modeling initiatives (URI/NBC, ROMS model)
4. Inform stakeholders and regulatory agencies.

Samples were taken from 3 sites: at the State Line; Rte 116 Bridge & Slater Mill.

In graphs showing Average Total Dissolved Nitrogen, the Blackstone River was the greatest contributor to the Bay with 7908 lbs/day (dry weather average = 5,000lbs/day, wet = 9,000lbs/day)

**Question** –We all agree to look at all the sources. If 26% come from point sources, are we fully committed to reduce N load or pass on to other sources?

Don't want to say something to get me in trouble with my boss, but from the perspective of our ratepayers, their income level is not as high as the rest of the state.

#### **Blackstone River Update - Nicole Belk, National Weather Service**

A new tool on the website to track flooding – Advanced Hydrological Prediction Service (AHPS). Point and click to see flood stage and warnings. Woonsocket Falls update from last year re concern about releases. Thundermist is not a conventional flood control dam, more of a run-of –river dam to pass flood flows. Gates are opened to pass high flows while maintaining lower upstream levels. Correct operation of dam should have negligible changes in downstream flows. National Weather Service and Corps of Engineers are in continual collaboration during potential and ongoing flood events.

Upcoming project: Inundation mapping at Northbridge.

March 2010 floods not caused by a single storm; caused by sequence of heavy rain events over 5 week period (3.5-4.5" mid-March event; 3.5-6.5" late March event) Percent Annual chance Exceedance Floods: Oct 2005 = 4%; March 2010 = 4%.

#### **River and Canal Maintenance – Keith Hainley, Blackstone River Watershed Council/Friends of the Blackstone (BRWC/FOB)**

No one is doing the maintenance if volunteers weren't doing it. The need for youth to perform Community Service has led to increased volunteer hours. The Blackstone is an all-urban river. Cleanups @ River Island Park in Woonsocket; shopping carts in the Peter's River. Knotweed taking over in places cleared by the '05 flood. If somebody doesn't clean it up it won't be a pretty river. Lonsdale Marsh intake is filled in with sediment. The bottom line is that there are a lot of people out there who care.

## **Canoe & Kayak Access – Jim Plasse, Blackstone River Watershed Assoc, presented by Peter Coffin, BRC**

Goal of River Access Program is to promote and protect recreational use of the River. Increased use of River by boaters has resulted in degradation of access and portage sites. The BRWA and BRWC/FOB are working under cooperative agreements with the Heritage Corridor to restore and protect river access sites.

Upper Section is a smaller river only accessible in spring and times of high water. Providence Street in Millbury at Goretti's is good starting point. Singing Dam Access and portage is complete. No portages yet for Millbury Electric, Fisherville, and Depot Street Dams. Plummer's Landing is designed and permitted. Riverdale Portage complete in 2006. Hartford Avenue construction next spring. Stanley Woolen completed in 2006. Rte 16 completed in 2009. Rte 122 completed in 2009. Millville Lock designed and permitted. Blackstone Gorge completed in 2008.

In Rhode Island, Access and portages exist at Cold Spring Park, River Island Park, River's Edge Recreational Complex, Manville Dam, Albion Dam, Kelly House, Pratt Dam, Lonsdale Drive-In, and Central Falls Landing at Madera Street. Future work includes developing access and parking at Sycamore Landing above Manville Dam and work to develop consistent signage for sites along the river.

## **Hydropower – Trish Jedele, Conservation Law Foundation**

Various partners came together to form the Northern Rhode Island Regional Energy Collaborative. Seth Handy, from the Essex Partnership helped perform a Phase I feasibility study. Example of tires shipped to CT to burn illustrates the need to blend economy with resources. Looking at the Blackstone and Pawtuxet watersheds from an energy perspective. The idea was to create a revenue stream, not just to plug a budget hole but also to help pay for dam maintenance and river clean ups. Not only to create jobs and help the economy but improves water quality and access.

**Question:** Technology has changed. What are the physical impacts of hydro plants both from existing or altered dams, much less new construction?

There is a whole range of technologies, which have a range of low to high impacts. We will explore newer technologies with less impact on river. One of the research questions going forward is technology optimization.

**Question:** Will people get a chance to vote on the proposed projects? Our desire is to Retire America's Hardest Working River. Give it a rest. As a recreational user how will flow be affected?

There will be opportunity for public input at the permitting level if it ever gets that far.

### **River & Small Boat landing/Access Sites – Bob Cox, Blackstone Valley Tourism Council**

Twenty years ago the Tourism Council initiated the Blackstone River & Canal Transportation System (BRCNTS). It was based on the Council's 1990 Regional Tourism Plan. In June 2009, at the request of RIDOT, the Council prepared the **Fresh Beginning Report**, which details how the ramps, landing and access sites can be completed over the next two to three years.

Since 1992, \$1.3 million in ISTEA funds from USDOT were awarded to the Council to develop access sites from Woonsocket to Pawtucket for the Council's 49-passenger riverboat **Explorer** and private canoes and kayaks. Originally, each municipality intended to construct its own landing/access site. At RIDOT's June 2009 meeting, with all the stakeholders attending, RIDOT decided this decentralized management approach had not worked and a more centralized approach was needed. The Tourism Council was assigned this new management function including reshaping where the federal funds should go. Priority was given to repairing the Central Falls facility, which was built in 2004 and damaged in the 2005 hurricane and constructing the Woonsocket and Cumberland sites.

The Council is confronted with trying to do more work with fewer funds due to a decade of inflation and a pollution problem at the Manville Landing site in Cumberland. Yesterday was the close of comment period on the clean-up plan prepared by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc. The cost of the Manville clean-up must come from the \$340, 000 "aggregate fund" programmed for work in Woonsocket, Cumberland and new sites in Lincoln, North Smithfield and Pawtucket. The Council's Agreement with RIDOT is currently being processed. The Council remains committed to completing the projects detailed in the **Fresh Beginning Report**. One reason for this optimistic outlook is that over 4000 people have enjoyed a ride on the Blackstone River in the **Explorer** since May of this year.

### **Residential & Commercial Development – Ben Tre, Tai-O Corp.**

Tai-O Corp is a private developer with several on-going projects renovating old mill buildings in Pawtucket, and sees Pawtucket as a microcosm of the River Corridor. Some projects are fully occupied. All the projects have attempted to improve accessibility. Where possible, Bio-retention was built to treat the volume of stormwater. A fish ladder is being proposed at Elizabeth Webbing, where the power plant will be decommissioned. There is no other access to the River. 417 Roosevelt will have public access, big time. There is a lack of signage. Need to facilitate "proper use". The public knows they are not supposed to be there, that it is privately owned land.

### **River Search, Rescue and Recovery, Bob Shields, Captain Cumberland Rescue**

As Coordinator of the Blackstone Valley Regional Rescue Captain Shields had three goals this past year: Access; Training & Equipment. The Friends of the Blackstone performed clearing at Pratt Dam. High angle Rope for lowering in boats, 12' inflatables that have to be hand carried.

The Friends of the Blackstone wrote a grant to provide training for 6-9 responders for river rescue provided by instructors from EMS. Friends of the Blackstone also got another grant to purchase 6 complete sets of equipment: helmets, throw bags, rope, vests, etc.

Pawtucket Water Works and FEMA will help purchase a hovercraft which can better conduct rescues efforts on ice, water and land, with speeds up to 40mph.

Thanks should go to the Friends of the Blackstone for all they did this past year.

#### **River Recreation – Hans Berg, Great Canadian Canoe Co.**

Great Canadian is a specialty outdoor recreation store located in Sutton on Rte 146. They have responded to the rush to kayaks as an easy way to get out on river. Enjoying the river experience encourages stewardship of the resource. They have good, knowledgeable staff with lots of local knowledge. Safety is most important. It is their job to scare a novice user so they will respect the power of the river and not take foolish actions. The River tear-off sheets produced by the Heritage Corridor is a great tool to help people get out on the river. The Blueways Alliance has been encouraging a network of river recreational opportunities.

Next week the 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Greenway Challenge will expose hundreds of recreational users to the divers opportunities in the Blackstone Valley.

#### **River Safety and Education – Peter Casson, Eastern Mountain Sports**

Buoy installation above dams courtesy of Friends of the Blackstone. Signage for portage at Pratt Tubes. River Rescue training provided to first responders as well as volunteers who work on the river. Kayak rescue and training provided to local groups such as the Blackstone Valley Paddle Club.

#### **Jim Cole, Rhode Island Canoe Association**

Adult inflatable PFD's are of questionable use, need for maintenance and replacement parts. CO2 cartridges can rust, rearming device costs \$20; new CO2 cartridge cost \$7. BV Paddle Club does not allow inflatables.

#### **Fish Passage – Frank Geary, BRWC/FOB**

Eight-minute video celebrating the Fish Ladder Project. All funding is in place for constructing the first 2 fish ladders, Main St Dam and Slater Dam both in Pawtucket. Bid package ready to go out under the management of Pawtucket Redevelopment Authority.

## **Conclusion**

The 2010 River-Users Conference closed with a wrap-up by BVTC President Billington who noted that the conference would be called again next year on **September 22, 2011** to update all Blackstone River Users on the progress we have made.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

<b>First</b>	<b>Last</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Nicole	Belk	Nation Weather Services
Ben	Ben-Tre	Residential & Commercial Development
Hans	Berg	Great Canadian, MA
Rachel	Calabro	Save the Bay
Bernard	Carroll	Trout Unlimited
Peter	Casson	Eastern Maintain Sports
Alice	Clemente	Blackstone Valley River Watershed/FOB
Peter	Coffin	National Heritage Corridor
Jim	Cole	Rhode Island Canoe Kayak Association
Christine	Comeau	Narragansett Bay Commission
Bob	Billington	BVTC
Bob	Cox	BVTC
Bob	Dombrowski	Captain of the Explorer
Arthur	Eddy	Gates Leighton Associates
Robert	Ericson	North Smithfield Town Planner
Roland	Gauvin	Blackstone River Watershed
Frank	Geary	Blackstone River Watershed Association
George	Gettinger	Cumberland Conservation Commission
Keith	Gonsalves	Ten Mile River Watershed Council
Keith	Hainley	BRWC/FOB
Bob	Hanacek	Army Corp of Engineers
John	Hill	Providence Journal
Brian	Jackvony	River Search, Rescue or Recovery
Normand	Janelle	Trout Unlimited
Tricia	Jedele	Conservation Law Foundation
Meg	Kerr	Narragansett Bay Estuary Program
Don	Leighton	Gates Leighton Associates
John	Marsland	Blackstone River Watershed Council/FOB
Don	Martin	Blackstone Valley Outfitters
John	Oatley	Veolia Water NELLC
Jonathan	O'Rourke	National Park Service
Jim	Plasse	BRWA, Board Member
Fred	Presley	National Heritage Corridor
Jan	Reitsma	National Heritage Corridor
Tom	Rossi	Johnson & Wales University
Fred	Rugo	Northern RI Trout Unlimited
Bob	Shields	Cumberland Rescue
Curt	Spalding	Environmental Protection Agency, NE
Michael	Sprague	Intermodal Planning
Jane	Talbot	City of Woonsocket
Donna	Williams	Audubon Society, MA