

River cleanup drive takes organized form

By Abby Pratt

Berkshire Eagle Staff

WEST STOCKBRIDGE — Some of the leading lights in the effort to clean and protect the Housatonic River agreed yesterday to organize themselves into a countywide group called the Housatonic River Initiative.

Gathered at the Sportsmen's Club by invitation of state Rep. Christopher J. Hodgkins, D-Lee, some 50 area environmentalists voted to meet again Oct. 22 at 7 p.m. at the state Department of Environmental Management office on South Mountain in Pittsfield.

That meeting is scheduled to include reports from newly formed subcommittees on river advocacy, river management, river bank improvement and river corridor protection.

The activists postponed indefinitely a decision on whether to affiliate themselves with the Pittsfield-based Berkshire Natural Resources Council or the Housatonic Valley Association of Cornwall, Conn., both of which had speakers at the gathering.

However, Hodgkins said afterward that the county group will be working hand-in-hand with both those organizations and the Massachusetts Watershed Coalition.

Former state Fisheries and Wildlife Commissioner Walter E. Bickford told the gathering that a river-mapping project by the state Department of Environmental Protection will begin in February. Bickford said that input from local observers could result in much-needed information on pollution "hot spots" and critical wildlife habitats, among other things.

"Ultimately, we hope to achieve a clean, green corridor and a healthy ecological infrastructure for the Housatonic River," Bickford said. "Without protected green ways and open land, there can be no water quantity or quality."

Hodgkins opened yesterday's meeting by saying he had grown up on Housatonic Street in Lee and had crossed a bridge over the river every day when he was a paperboy.

"You didn't want to fall in," he recalled. "The river changed colors every day, and there was hardened foam on it. We used to try to hit the foam with rocks so they would stay on top and we could watch them float down the river."

Ten years ago, when the issue of GE-generated polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) was hot, meetings on pollution of the river were packed, Hodgkins said.

RIVER, continued on B12

River advocates launch new initiative

■ RIVER, from B1

But, two years ago in Pittsfield, he said, only five people, including himself, showed up for a similar meeting: Wislocki, then-Selectman George L. Darey of Lenox, who heads the state Fisheries and Wildlife board, and two residents whose families he said had suffered PCB-related illnesses.

Hodgkins said, however, that the movement to draw attention to and clean up the river has been reactivated by various people, including a number who were present at yesterday's meeting: Rachel Fletcher of Great Barrington, who has spearheaded a river bank cleanup and protection effort in that town; Pittsfield City Councilor Timothy J. DiSilva, and Pittsfield Conservation Commission Chairman Michael Makes.

Road to recovery

"It's time for us to organize," said Hodgkins. "We're poised for a recovery."

Fletcher said the Housatonic was, for years, a river working for industry in Berkshire County and remains the backbone of the region. But she said it has suffered a lot of abuse and neglect in the form of PCBs, paper waste and raw sewage.

She said the grass-roots volunteer efforts that have been launched in communities along the river are the best guarantee

Conservation chief seeks aid from river's neighbors

By Abby Pratt

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PITTSFIELD — Conservation Commission Chairman Michael J. Makes is issuing an invitation to Housatonic River abutters to participate in a series of river cleanups next month.

A letter targeted for mailing this week asks everyone owning property along the river in the city to lend a hand and moral support to the effort. Also needed is access to the river over private land and volunteers to provide equipment for removing debris from the waterway and its banks, the letter says.

The City Council asked the Conservation Commission to take the lead in the river cleanup campaign while it seeks legislative approval of the formation of a Housatonic River Commission.

The volunteer cleanups will be Oct. 3 on the West Branch from Pontoosuc Avenue to Fred Garner Park on Pomeroy Avenue; and Oct. 17 on the East Branch from Coltsville to Newell Street. Both will begin at 9 a.m.

This summer, the Berkshire Training and Employment Program supplied workers to clean up the river from Pontoosuc Lake south to the area near Wahconah Park, according to Makes. GE has volunteered to clean over the next few weeks the East Branch from Newell Street to Holmes Road, he said.

Further information may be obtained by contacting the Conservation Commission at 499-9359.

of continued maintenance.

"People are really coming back to the river," she said. "If we can work together, we can really make a difference."

Wislocki characterized yesterday's confab as "a watershed meeting for the rejuvenation of our river." He offered the re-

sources of the Resources Council, which advocates for the environment and protects open space, to anyone who wished to take advantage of them.

He gave credit to several people he called "the heroes of the river," including others present: Frances C. "Sissy" Paddock of

Lenox, former president of the dormant Housatonic River Watershed Association; surveyor Charles Liston of Lenox Dale, who mapped the wildlife habitat areas from Lenox to Pittsfield; Eagle columnist and sportsman Theodore Giddings of Lenox and Dennis Alsop of Stockbridge, who canoed across the state some years ago to bring attention to the plight of its rivers.

Steven J. Whitman and Lynn Werner of the Housatonic Valley Association said they were planning to open a Berkshire County field office, staffed part time to coordinate volunteers, compile and publish information and provide technical assistance for activities on behalf of the river and its 2,000-square-mile watershed.

"We're dedicated to protecting the whole Housatonic River watershed, from Pittsfield to Long Island Sound," said Whitman.

He said the county Housatonic River Watershed Association had joined forces with his organization about a year ago.

Professional help

Several people in the audience emphasized the need to affiliate with an organization like Whitman's because it can raise the money to sustain local efforts and back volunteers with professional help.

Some dissension in the ranks could already be heard yesterday as the meeting progressed. Robert Thieriot of the Monterey Land Trust complained after a long statement by river activist Benno Friedman of Sheffield that there was "too much yakking."

"If that's what the organization is about, a year from now it won't exist," Thieriot said.

But Wislocki said that the people in the room were all very different and that what was necessary was to "keep your eye on the prize, capture the energy so there is a constituency that can go to a polluter and say, 'Do it, or else.'"

"Environmentalists love to yak," he counseled Thieriot. "The important thing is to keep this initiative going."