

Wallkill River's future debated

"Now that we're here, where are we?"

Dennis Doyle, Ulster County Planning Director

By Jeremiah Horrigan

Times Herald-Record

NEW PALTZ - The Wallkill River has a bad reputation.

It's polluted. You can't safely eat its fish or drink or even swim its waters.

But all that could and needs to change, according to regional planners, environmentalists and river enthusiasts who gathered at SUNY New Paltz on Thursday.

The gathering, which was called to explore "The Future of the Wallkill River," drew a crowd of several hundred people, out of which organizers hoped to establish a "working group" dedicated to rehabilitating the river's reputation.

Planners from Orange and Ulster counties described the watershed's reach: It runs north for 90 miles through New Jersey and New York, passing through 22 communities in Orange and eight communities in Ulster before emptying into the Hudson River in Kingston.

David Church, Orange County's commissioner of planning, said the river suffers from a variety of "confused perceptions" and myths, including the belief that the river's pollution is invariably the fault of unnamed "upstream" forces and that overdevelopment has been a major factor in the river's decline.

"That's not really the case," Church said.

With the exception of exploding population levels at Kiryas Joel, he said, "the region's actually been losing population slightly."

Ulster County Planning Director Dennis Doyle presented the audience with a question that resembled a Zen Buddhist koan: "Now that we're here, where are we?"

Doyle described the need for updated information that draws on advances in local wetlands legislation, open space plans and data banks.

Dan Shapley, water quality program manager for Riverkeeper, urged the crowd to become "the voice for the river," as Riverkeeper has become the voice of the Hudson.

"It's not ruined," he said. "We need to focus on the future." —jhorrigan@th-record.com