

Headline news

Up from the muck

Citizen activists convene on "The Future of the Wallkill River"

by Frances Marion Platt

IN WELCOMING THE crowd of about 150 clean water advocates who turned out for the symposium on "The Future of the Wallkill River" that convened last Thursday afternoon at the SUNY New Paltz Student Union Building, mayor Jason West called attention to the Regatta coming up on May 3: "That's the one day a year that we pay attention to the Wallkill in New Paltz. The rest of the year we ignore it." But as was clear from the enthusiastic turnout, West is far from alone in believing that "The Wallkill River should be our crown jewel." KT Tobin, associate director of the SUNY New Paltz Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach (CRREO), which hosted the event, called the Wallkill "a gem to be embraced."

Though the Wallkill is technically classified by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) as a Class B river -- meaning swimmable but not drinkable -- participants in the Regatta are going to be warned not to take that "embracing" too literally. There was even talk of canceling the event this year due to health concerns associated with skin contact with the Wallkill's murky water, and anyone whose homemade craft should founder (as Regatta entries often do) is advised to be careful not to swallow any of it. Truth be told, that Class B designation is "best thought of as a goal statement" and not an accurate description of current reality, according to Dan Shapley, water quality program manager at Riverkeeper, who was one of the speakers at Thursday's conference.

Shapley showed slides of charts comparing contamination results from test samples taken by Riverkeeper from 74 sites along the Hudson River and its tributaries in 2008, and pointed out that "the tributaries are much more frequently contaminated." The Wallkill in particular showed a "distressingly high frequency of contamination," and also scored near the top for "magnitude of contamination." But he wasn't ready to give up hope for the river. "Most people talk about the Wallkill like it's just gone, like



The Wallkill River in New Paltz.

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it's ruined -- but it's not," he averred.

Noting that "There hasn't been a strong voice for the Wallkill River for many years," Shapley cautioned against cynicism and despair, pointing out that there are many possible ways to improve water quality on a community-by-community basis. "It's an impediment to progress to focus on how all our problems are coming from upstream," he told the *New Paltz Times*. "We need to start where we are." In fact, according to several of the speakers at the conference, the consistently cleanest test points along the Wallkill are the ones nearest the state border, so we can't blame industrial waste discharges from New Jersey for our water pollution problems.

"Sediment is one of the priority pollutants in the Wallkill River," said Kevin Sumner, an Orange County Soil and Water Conservation official who, along with David Church of the Orange County Department of Planning, shared information about the already-existing Wallkill Watershed Conservation and Management Plan. Initially compiled in 1997 and updated with new data in 2004, the Plan compared agricultural and developed land in the Wallkill's 800-square-mile watershed. While Sumner identified stormwater runoff from paved urban areas and silt erosion from construction sites as significant pollution sources, Church cautioned, "We have to

overcome the context that it's all due to overdevelopment. There's not that much new development right now." Runoff from agricultural land is also a problem, with Shapley later noting, "The Management Plan identified 400 horse farms in the lower Wallkill Valley alone."

All of the experts on hand seemed to concur that the worst spikes in pollution of the Wallkill occur immediately following heavy rain events. Not only does stormwater runoff leach fertilizers and pesticides from farm fields and wash oil and gasoline from asphalt surfaces into the river, but it also causes storm sewers to overflow and back up into pump stations and sewage treatment plants, flushing untreated sewage into surface streams. Updating aging water and

sewer infrastructure is high on the priority lists of officials who want to see the Wallkill cleaned up.

Following the main presentations in the Multi-purpose Room, the participants separated into five breakout sessions in smaller meeting rooms to brainstorm and prioritize practical ways in which citizen activists can contribute to improved water quality in the Wallkill. Riverkeeper's Shapley and Craig Chapman, owner of New Paltz Kayaking Tours, focused on efforts to make the river friendlier for Class B recreational use and the ways in which the increasing popularity of water sports can raise awareness of the state of the Wallkill. Matthew Geho of Northern Westchester Joint Waterworks joined Village of New Paltz Environmental Policy Commission chair Don Kerr in championing the goal of making the Wallkill clean enough to become a source of drinking water.

Orange and Ulster County Planning Department officials David Church and Dennis Doyle addressed land use strategies. Orange County soil conservation guru Sumner was joined by Amanda LaValle of the Ulster County Department of the Environment to convene a group on the relationship between farming and water quality, especially with regard to flood control management concerns. And DEC Region 3 fisheries manager Mike Flaherty and the Hudson River Estuary Program's conservation and land use coordinator Laura Heady led discussions about the status and future of fish and wildlife habitat in the Wallkill watershed.

All five groups were tasked with coming up with ideas for what Shapley called "actionable priority items" that could engage river activists in the near future. "We don't want this to be a one-time thing," he said. "A citizens' group is badly needed on the Wallkill River." The action agenda developed in the breakout sessions will be publicized on a webpage yet to be established, possibly hosted by the Hudson River Watershed Alliance. Meanwhile, local residents who wish to get involved in the startup of this new Wallkill River watershed group can e-mail Shapley at dshapley@riverkeeper.org stating their area of interest and be added to a list to receive updates. And keep your ears open locally for more news of specific projects that need volunteers! ++

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