

April 4, 2007

## **As I See It**

Over the past several years the Blackstone River has found its voice and is calling to us to restore it to good health. We who live and work in the 29 Blackstone River watershed communities from Worcester to Pawtucket bear that responsibility. The Blackstone River Coalition (BRC) applauds the EPA for setting strict limits for phosphorus and nitrogen for the Upper Blackstone Water Pollution Abatement District in Millbury.

The Blackstone is overwhelmed by these pollutants. This was well documented by the extensive Blackstone River Initiative study released in May, 2001 and the BRC 2006 Water Quality Report Card (see the March 9, 2007 Telegram: "Pollution Haunts Blackstone: Nutrients Rampant at Some Checkpoints in Watershed"). Phosphorus and nitrogen promote excessive growth of algae and other aquatic plants, and when they die, decomposition reduces oxygen vital to a healthy aquatic system. In other words, no safe fishing or swimming in the Blackstone River.

Although these nutrients can come from diverse sources, the major contributors are wastewater treatment plants that, at long last, are being required to meet stricter limits. The Upper Blackstone is by far the largest plant on the river, with a maximum treatment capacity of 56 million gallons of sewage per day. During summer, the effluent from the plant is more than 70 percent of the flow of the River. If you stand on the Blackstone Bikeway bridge where the river collects the treatment plant discharge you can see a remarkable increase in vegetation just downstream. Reducing nutrients from the plant will improve water quality and increase recreational opportunities.

But what about costs? Yes, there is a price to pay for clean water. Fortunately the City of Worcester has done a good job of keeping sewer costs down. Even including the \$150 cost per year per household for the current upgrades to the treatment plant, the average Worcester household pays \$381 per year for sewer services, which is well below the state average of \$440. What's more, many other communities are paying much more for similar services. Upgrades to meet the new proposed limits will be costly, but far less so than doing nothing. Since the Clean Water Act of 1972 we have all seen the huge benefits (even if we measure them only in dollars) of a cleaner river and the more diverse and abundant fish and wildlife that go with it. On the Blackstone the return on our investment has been enormous but is by no means complete. Again there is a price to pay for clean water. But again, that price is an investment. The BRC pledges to work with the City to find creative solutions with state and federal agencies to fund the required upgrades.

The City has indicated that it will appeal the permit limits, a process that will cost

much time and money. An appeal can take years, during which pollution will continue, legal fees accumulate and costs to ratepayers for inevitable upgrades compound.

We can learn from recent history. The permit that was initially issued to the Upper Blackstone in 1996 won't be met until the present upgrades are completed in 2009 – that's 13 years. The City appealed the 1996 permit; the permit was issued in 1999, modified in 2001 and a consent order was issued in 2002. Those limits have been relaxed while the treatment plant constructs the upgrades. All in all, the Blackstone River has not been getting the treatment it needs and we deserve. The costs now being incurred to meet the current permit limits are far higher than they would have been if the City had complied when the original permit was issued. Fighting back and forth is a losing proposition for all involved, especially the River.

“Enough is enough.” Enough phosphates and enough nitrates. It's time for Worcester to walk the walk of a green city at the headwaters of a blue river.

Donna M. Williams, President  
Blackstone River Coalition

*The Blackstone River Coalition is a partnership of numerous organizations working to restore the Blackstone River and to improve the health of its watershed through the Campaign for a Fishable/Swimmable Blackstone River by 2015.*