

Rescue Call Goes Out for Forge River

By ROSAMARIA MANCINI

RON LUPSKI fondly remembers growing up in Mastic near the Forge River, especially the swimming, fishing and boating. He still lives in his boyhood home on Willis Creek, which feeds into the Forge, but Mr. Lupski has not been able to take advantage of his waterfront property in years.

Today, the Forge is a river in distress. The river, which runs between the hamlets of Moriches and Mastic and empties into Moriches Bay, is littered with dead fish; the water, a mix of fresh and salt, is a murky gray color.

"It's not a pretty sight," Mr. Lupski said. "Everything is dying, and it smells like a cesspool."

Mr. Lupski, along with other residents, fishermen and environmentalists, is pressing Suffolk County to take steps to save the river, or they say that they may petition to have it placed on the State Department of Environmental Conservation's list of impaired waters.

"There have been plenty of signs and symptoms, and we've now reached a breaking point," said Kevin McAllister, the president of Peconic Baykeeper, a nonprofit environmental group. "Something needs to be done."

Water quality in the Forge began to decline about 20 years ago. Residential development in the Mastic and Moriches area, where there are no municipal sewage systems, meant leaks from septic systems and fertilizer from lawns and gardens entered the river when it rained. Runoff from local duck farms added to the problem, and so did the waste from wild waterfowl.

In order to be placed on the impaired-waters list, the state would have to determine that the river was no longer fit for fishing and swimming, and it would then set standards to help reduce pollution. The river would also be eligible for federal aid under the Clean Water Act.

Peter Scully, the regional director of the Department of Environmental Conservation, said that placing the Forge on the impaired-waters list should be considered a last resort. "If we harness all this energy and deal with it now and act appropriately, it won't be necessary to go in that direction," he said.

Mike Deering, Suffolk's director of environmental affairs, said that the county was assembling a task force to outline the river's problems and come up with a solution.



Phil Marino for The New York Times

Kevin McAllister of Peconic Baykeeper examines a sample from the bottom of the Forge River to check on the condition of aquatic life.

"It's taken decades for the river to reach this poor state, and there is no simple and quick solution," he said.

The Forge River, which is about three miles long and ranges in depth from two to five feet, begins in the wetlands between Mastic and Moriches. Fred Chiofalo, a commercial fisherman in Brookhaven, once took crabs, clams, mussels and eels from the river. "I was able to get everything out of there," he said.

This summer, the river took a turn for the worse. Mr. McAllister said he first noticed the "shocking conditions" during a motorboat trip along the river in June. Dead crabs floated on the surface, and eels, usually bottom dwellers, were up near the surface in search of more oxygen, he said. The smell of rot and decay hung in the air.

"The river wasn't pristine before, but these conditions made me immediately believe that something was wrong, that there had been a sewage spill," Mr. McAllister said.

The county Department of Health Services tested the water and found there was no significant sewage contamination and no immediate health threat. But its report, dated July 12, said that it found extremely low levels of dissolved oxygen in the water, a condition that often leads to the production of hydrogen sulfide, which smells like rotten eggs. The odor and the river's cloudy color were intensified by unusually hot weather, the report said.

Mr. Lupski contends that the county government should have reacted sooner to the river's problems but did not because it was happening in Mastic, a working-class neighborhood. "If there were signs of a problem any place else they never would have been ignored, it would have never gotten this bad, and that's just sad and terrible for us," he said.

Councilman Edward Hennessey, who represents the area on the Brookhaven Town Board, agreed and said the district had been victimized by poor planning decisions for years.

That is why Mr. Hennessey, a Republican candidate for town supervisor, said he was asking the Town Board to revoke the zoning change granted in 2002 to the Beechwood Organization for a 466-unit retirement community, to be built close to the Forge in Moriches and which could create more septic system runoff. When the zoning change was approved, six board members voted in favor, and Mr. Hennessey abstained.

"The project is not built yet, and the severity of the conditions at the river dictate for us to take a step back," he said.

David Sloane, a lawyer for Beechwood, called a zoning rollback unacceptable and said his client would take the matter to court if it were approved. He said that Beechwood gave the town 50 acres as a condition of the zoning change. The board is expected to vote on the matter within the next month.