

Volunteers recruited to monitor Forge River

Baykeeper enlists the aid of residents

By Peggy Spellman Hoey

A handful of dedicated volunteers have stepped forward to offer their guardianship of the Forge River's troubled waters.

This summer, the polluted conditions of the river, which runs south between Moriches and Mastic into Moriches Bay, drew the attention of residents and officials following a fish kill, accompanied by a foul smelling odor and an oddly colored plume in the water.

An examination by the Suffolk County Department of Health and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation determined that the conditions were the result of an algae bloom, a natural occurrence during periods of hot weather, but some area residents continue to remain unconvinced.

So, they have decided to take the matter into their own hands.

With the help of Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister, a group of residents from the Waterways at Moriches senior housing complex will take turns testing the river's water in an effort to aid officials in coming up with a long-term solution to improve the river's conditions.

Mr. McAllister has started similar volunteer networks in Westhampton Beach Village and on Shelter Island.

Jack Lewis, the Waterways dockmaster, first met the Baykeeper on Friday, June 17, the week of the fish kill, while Mr. McAllister, who was escorting

reporters on a tour of the bay, was discovering the plume in the river.

At the time, the river's problems—which were well known to those that lived nearby—were not yet on the county's or state's radar. Mr. Lewis said that he could not shake the notion that something had to be done about

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the river's condition. "I knew we had to get organized," said Mr. Lewis.

"People need to be able to go into the water or jump off of a dock and not have to worry about an ear infection two days later," said Mr. McAllister, in reference to elevated amounts of

fecal coliform bacteria that was discovered in the river this summer.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, seven volunteers met informally with Mr. McAllister to go over the use of their new dissolved oxygen meter, which can gauge the status of the river's health, to discuss a scheduling game plan for the future.

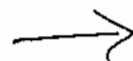
Mr. McAllister said that it would be beneficial to pick several testing points where water samples could be taken two to three times per week.

"We don't throw our hands up here," said Mr. McAllister, noting that the



A group of residents have decided to volunteer their time to monitor the water quality of the Forge River under the tutelage of Peconic Baykeeper Kevin McAllister, left, including, from left to right, Waterways dock master Jack Lewis, Roger Olsen, Gary Schmitt and Mike Nebel.

PEGGY SPELLMAN HOEY



group will be able to take an active hand in stewarding change to their environment while avoiding the red tape of bureaucracy. "We get in there and get them dirty."

Ed Guyer, who has offered his boat, *Per Diem*, to the effort, said that he decided to volunteer because he felt it would reduce the lag time between testing and receiving answers from officials.

"People in the community had called the DEC," he recalled of June's event. "But, when they came down here, they said that they couldn't do anything about it. It took a week or so for anything to happen."

With a regular testing schedule, the residents feel that they will be able to improve response times to further events and document the river's condition for further study by officials.

The group has also been asking residents and concerned citizens to contribute to the effort to save the river.

Last week alone, the residents were able to raise approximately \$1,000, which will be donated to the Peconic Baykeeper Organization to help fund the testing effort.

"The checks have been coming in here and there," said Mr. Lewis, noting that the group will need to pay for lab work. "I wanted to get everyone to send in at least \$50, but that was never going to happen. Some gave more money than I expected. This is a good start."

In the meantime, Mr. McAllister said that he will be petitioning the state to designate the Forge River as "impaired water," which would allow the group to apply for government grant money.

On the Mastic side of the river, a separate group of residents led by Ronnie Lupski are in the process of forming a non-profit organization called the Save the Forge River Group to help raise awareness of the river's condition and to lobby for the support of officials.

Mr. Lupski's group was able to acquire water sampling equipment through donations from a concerned resident who asked to remain anonymous.

Similar to his comrades across the river, Mr. Lupski said that volunteers monitoring the river must remain vigilant and on the lookout for noticeable

symptoms of stress, such as odor and further fish kills.

The river has been affected for years from pollutants such as nitrates from fertilizer and duck excrement, Mr. Lupski said, and the pollutants contained within storm-water runoff.

"Every year the river gets worse and worse," said Mr. Lupski, an avid boater and fisherman, who has lived on Wills Creek, one of the river's tributaries, for his entire life. "Basically, the river's arteries are clogged. It needs a triple bypass."

The two groups hope to get in a few monitoring sessions this fall so that it will be easier to pick up where they left off in the spring.

Mr. McAllister will check with the residents periodically.

"This is great that they're finally getting organized," Mr. McAllister said. "That's what I like to see."