

## Patuxent River report offers grim outlook

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Southern Marylanders

seeking to become warriors for the Patuxent River can fight the first battle in their front yards, by waging a scorched-earth campaign against their lawns.

The Patuxent 2020 report, released Monday, Dec. 17, by Patuxent Riverkeeper, gives a grim assessment of the river's condition but also spells out what needs to be done to return it to its former glory. The report lists both policy prescriptions and individual actions necessary to save the river; some of the latter may make Calvert residents wince.

Calling the iconic suburban lawn a "1950s status symbol," the report calls for its elimination as much as possible, to be replaced with wildflower or native plant gardens that use less water and don't need fertilizers or pesticides to thrive.

Short of that, the report asks that companies and individuals limit the use of these and other chemicals outside of agriculture.

"Whether from the avid gardener who over-applies fertilizers and pesticides, the backyard mechanic who dumps his oil down the storm drain, or the dog owner who fails to clean up after Fido, the cumulative impact of these actions is significant but the individual responsibility is hard to trace," the report said.

Also likely to rile Calvert County residents is a suggestion to "limit the use of septic tank systems in new developments," to protect the river from nitrogen run-off; the report also suggested requiring new septic systems to be nitrogen-removing.

One-fourth of homes in the watershed are now on septic systems, contributing one-eighth of the watershed's nitrogen load.

Report co-author Jennifer Bevan-Dangel said the aim in writing the report is to spur communities to take action to save the river.

"I think we are seeing the need for more significant actions, and while we certainly don't discourage people from taking little steps, taking the bigger steps is becoming increasingly important," she said. "Individuals can really look at their home and the land around them and find ways to reduce their impact. Let the lawn go back to natural vegetation. Replant trees. Replacing trees helps with global warming and it helps with water quality effects because it can" absorb run-off and nutrients.

Former Sen. Bernie Fowler (D), who has spearheaded efforts to restore the Patuxent, said changes in policy would be much more effective than any actions individuals would take.

"I don't agree with everything in the report, obviously, nor will anyone else," Fowler said. "[Eliminating lawns] would be perfection, but, you know, we Americans are accustomed to a lifestyle and even when the heart desires something else I don't think they'll be willing to compromise all their lawns. I don't think they're going to plant a lawn full of trees and ignore the grass. I think you can have a lawn but it has to be done in a professional way and not overload it [with fertilizers]."

An important and difficult step will be convincing all seven Maryland counties in the watershed, even those that don't stand to gain economically from the river's revival, to do their parts, Fowler said.

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“You have to understand, I’m not sympathetic, but I’m smart enough to understand that the northern counties do not have the intensity of interest that we do in the Southern Maryland area, because we have the really productive end of the river where the fish, oysters, clams and all were thriving abundantly in years gone,” Fowler said. “... My concern is convincing the northern counties, who have much less to lose in terms of the productivity of the river, and so it will be a challenge to get them to agree in toto with this action plan. That doesn’t give us an excuse for not trying.”

And the river cannot wait forever for those living alongside it to get their act together. When 10 percent of the watershed is covered by “impervious surfaces,” or paved, the volume of runoff will be such that the river will have reached a point of no return, Bevan-Dangel said.

“Ten percent impervious is a magic tipping-point. Once you pave 10 percent of the watershed, it’s very hard to bring it back,” she said. Four percent of the Patuxent watershed is paved now, “so there’s still the ability to restore it. So that just makes taking action now and planning growth for the future so it’s in balance with the river very important.”

Bevan-Dangel wants to see low-density “sprawl” development decrease to reduce the amount of paved surface.

“When you build dense you’re able to build infrastructure in one place to support it. ... [Current development in the watershed] is very sprawling. This is another case where Calvert County is leading the way. They are really trying to plan for denser housing. But when you look watershed wide” much remains to be done, she said.

Fowler would like to see efforts concentrate on controlling urban and agricultural runoff, sewage treatment plant discharges and air pollution from coal-fired power plants like that at Chalk Point, he said.

“Let’s move the environment up the totem pole,” Fowler said. “What could be more important than clean air and clean water? ... For too long, I think the environment has taken a backseat. There’s no time left. There’s just no time left to hope things get better. We can make it better, but it’s we, we the people, one of the miserable failures that I’ve experienced is being unable to raise the awareness level of ordinary people. We really need to make this a priority.”

Saving the river will require political action, and Fowler said he expects help from Maryland politicians at the state and national level.

The report says that the public and the government must both be involved, putting pressure on each other, if anything is to be accomplished.

“We’ve got a lot more people to reach and a lot more minds to convince if people in Calvert County — if every resident in Calvert County realized that they’re living in a hazardous zone — it doesn’t mean they’re going to die tomorrow, but it means their lifeline is probably going to be shortened because of the appalling conditions that are beginning to generate here,” Fowler said. “That’s one reason that I’m all for nuclear power. They say there was that one explosion, but I’d rather go that way than slowly choke to death because of the lack of pure air to breathe. Fossil fuel is not the way to go. It’s just not.”

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