Water Issue Sparks Interest with Concerned Citizens

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The Little Patuxent Watershed (LPWS) stretches some 51 miles meandering through the woods of Howard County. As one of the fastest growing counties in three decades, Howard County’s continual development has degraded habitat for both land and aquatic species. Of the 66,214 acres over which the watershed stretches, 28,055 of that amount is acreage which falls into the confines of the Watershed Restoration Action Strategy (WRAS).

Cathy Garger, a Columbia Fairway Hills resident, has witnessed the county’s streams and forests deteriorate since she moved to Howard County in 1993. As a result, she quickly became the driving force behind the formation of Little Patuxent River Watershed Association, a citizen group with a common goal of restoring the watershed. The group, comprised of some 15 members whose backgrounds range from stream biologists to college professors, held its first meeting on Tues., Aug. 17 under Garger’s leadership.

According to Garger, the watershed problem is due to a lack of public awareness, a void she hopes to fill.

“We’re missing citizen input and you must have that group of people who will work with you to bring issues to the front. Citizen group work drives county funding for environmental budgeting. The only way to get more is to demand more environmentally. It’s as if we’ve been sleeping in Howard County...but Howard County is only half the component, Anne Arundel County is the other half,” said Garger.

Currently, the watershed falls into Category 5 on the List of Impaired Water 303 (D) list, (five being the worst) and defined as “a waterbody impaired that doesn’t attain water quality standards.” The listing is required by the Federal Clean Water Act for the state of Maryland to assess every two years.

Numbers Game

Frederick L. Tutman, a Patuxent Riverkeeper and Waterkeeper Alliance member, categorizes the watershed and its current state as one of the worst. In fact, on Aug. 7 Tutman flew over the watershed and explained that from an aerial viewpoint the damage is obvious.
"You can tell its more gnarly than others. When something's wrong you can tell when you see it, smell it, and touch it," explained Tutman, a 25-year activist.

And it shows on the bottom line. Recent findings show that Little Patuxent Waste Water Treatment is not helping aid Howard County in its efforts to improve the watershed. Howard County has a 6.7 nitrogen concentrate, equating to a total nitrogen load of 350,198. Compare that to a 12,222 nitrogen load in Anne Arundel County’s Fort Meade and a mere 4,771 in Carroll County’s Taneytown and the difference is astounding.

As a result, Little Patuxent watershed has been placed in Category 5, the worst category in Howard County.

"U.S. citizens have the right and responsibility to do something. It’s gotta start somewhere, it’s not gonna happen tomorrow or next week, or next month," said Lou Etegn, a member of the Alliance at Chesapeake Bay.

River Heritage

Tutman believes the problem today lies in the fact that many people have lost their touch with heritage.

“What we’re trying to get back to is what we had as kids where we could drink out of the river. In urbanized areas people don’t always have that connection. Everybody has that place, that benchmark, that’s genuine and it reclaims a part of the universe that feels right,” said Tutman who urges people to “spend some time with the river and those messages will come up and people will get them through that eloquence.”

However, to Garger there is no crisis unless you read the numbers, increasing the importance of public awareness and environmental education.

Maryland Delegate Elizabeth Bobo, a member of the Environmental Committee for Howard County at the state level, shares Garger’s sentiment wholeheartedly.

“Environmental organizations in Howard County are not at their strongest point so it’s great they’re doing this,” said Bobo who later stated that “there is more hope for environmental issues within the Howard County villages then I’ve seen in over 20 years.”

Spreading the Word

Garger believes the missing component lies in education and public participation. However, the county’s steady growth rate begs the question of how much more expansion our environment can handle.

Whatever incentives or inspirations are in order, Garger stresses that “it is time for citizens to become stewards of this community...We have to be the answer to it and not expect people to do it for us. We can’t expect pristine but we can expect better quality
and vision for LPW improvement. I believe the vast majority of the people who live in Ellicott City and Columbia don’t realize the conditions.”

The group aims to educate through the schools, essentially using the classroom as an informative tool to hook both children and parents. Creating an awareness is the group’s main focus, therefore establishing a connection with children through active programs and fun hands-on learning presents an alternative link.

“You have to hook every single person so you have to think of your children and grandchildren,” said Patty Yergey, a Chesapeake Bay Foundation volunteer and working scientist.

Hollys Allon, a Turf Valley resident and member of the group, echoes Yergey’s vision.

“It comes from the kids. Our children are activists and we need to go into the schools and give them activities and let them pass it along to their parents,” said Allon.

The group anticipates events such as an annual water snapshot event combined with a frogwatch where volunteers gather water samples to test water quality. In the meantime, the group’s first year focus remains to restore and improve the watershed.

Garger concluded that the bottom line is that “the watershed is more than just a river, it’s the forests surrounding it and it says our forests are basically dead.”

The Little Patuxent Watershed Association will hold its next meeting on Tues., Sept. 21. For more information contact Cathy Garger at 410-997-8699 or cmg8765@comcast.net.