

## **DEVELOPING A REGIONAL APPROACH TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE THE RECREATIONAL USE OF THE PASSAIC RIVER CORRIDOR IN UNION COUNTY**

The City of Summit and Township of Berkeley Heights have partnered together with the Passaic River Coalition to develop and implement programs that protect and enhance the recreational values of the Passaic River Corridor. They want their towns to help improve the quality of water in the river which is a source of drinking water for over a million people. They also want their communities to have better access to the many recreational opportunities provided by the Passaic River.

The effort began with the revisions of the Berkeley Heights and Summit Natural Resource Inventories. Other joint programs include the preparation of ordinances to protect the river's riparian buffer zone and efforts to extend the Passaic River Park in conjunction with Union County. The towns are also interested in a joint desnagging effort along the Union County stretch of the Passaic River.

As part of the planning process, the Berkeley Heights and Summit Environmental Commissions held a visioning meeting on November 30, 2009 to provide members of the public an opportunity to share their thoughts on the state of the Passaic River. Details of the meeting are included in Appendix J.

In the summer of 2010 the Passaic River Coalition conducted an Analysis of the Passaic Riverfront in Summit to aid in the planning process for the regional project with Berkeley Heights (See Appendix A for full report). The Passaic River forms the northwestern border of Summit and fortunately most of the riverfront is preserved and owned by Union County. The analysis describes how a greenway could be created along the river, and where boating and fishing access sites could be located.

The following are recommendations from the Summit Riverfront Analysis:

1. Continue enforcing the Riparian Buffer Ordinance.
2. Desnag the river to facilitate boating.
3. Meet with Union County to discuss creating boating and fishing access points on County property.
4. Solicit feedback about potential locations for fishing access points.
5. Run an education program for landowners about river-friendly landscaping practices.
6. Discuss partnership opportunities with New Providence.

The Passaic River serves as the northwestern border of the City of Summit. At this point in the river's 80 mile journey to Newark Bay, it takes on a meandering and winding shape as it sluggishly flows between the Second and Third Watchung Mountains. There are many spots along the river in this area which are rather peaceful and picturesque, surrounded by forests. But in many other places on both sides of the river, residences, office buildings, and industrial sites have been built very close to the waterfront. Partly because of its location on the border of towns, the Passaic River is not a well utilized resource for passive recreation nor is it an attraction for residents or visitors.

The Summit Environmental Commission has expressed an interest in creating a greenway along the Passaic River in Summit. A greenway would provide new recreational opportunities for residents, help the community become more connected to the river, and provide a natural buffer that will help protect

water quality and habitat. The Commission also envisions a greenway program that extends outside of city limits and includes Berkeley Heights and New Providence.

Riparian buffers are vegetated strips of land that border streams and rivers. They play an important role in protecting the aquatic ecosystem by reducing the impacts of storm water runoff and nonpoint pollution. The shade provided by trees keeps water temperatures lower in the summer which allows a greater variety of fish species to thrive. During major storm events, riparian buffers can help protect nearby communities by absorbing floodwater. Summit has a Riparian Buffer Ordinance (City of Summit, New Jersey, Municipal Code Chapter 26, Section 11) which requires a 50 foot buffer zone around streams and rivers; new development cannot encroach in this area. There are several places along the river where the riparian buffer is less than 50 feet (these spots are described in the following subsections). If these properties come before the Planning Board in the future, the feasibility of increasing the riparian buffer should be examined.

Of the 2.67 miles of Passaic River riverfront in the city, 2.23 are already preserved as open space and are owned by Union County. This is an important step towards creating a greenway. For the purposes of this analysis, the river was examined in three parts, which are described below and shown in Figure A-1 and A-2.

### **Section 1: From Summit's western border to the Morristown**

The entire riverfront in this section is owned by Union County and is maintained as Passaic River Park. With the exception of several residences, an electrical substation, and the city's recycling center and transfer station, most of this area is open space. In some senses, this area is rather isolated from the rest of the community because of the elevated train tracks that form the park's eastern border. The park contains a mixed hardwood forest with mature oaks, maples, tulip trees, and other species. The forest understory is rather slim, showing evidence of over-browsing by deer.

Starting at the Stanley Avenue Bridge Picnic Area, visitors can head west and then south to follow the Passaic upriver. This trail is fairly well maintained though in some places it veers away from the river. In the future, branches could be added to the main trail so hikers could walk down to the river. The trail ends at the southern end of the park in a residential development. The trail does cross two roads; while these are not main roads, the City should consider posting signs indicating the presence of hikers and painting a crosswalk.

Back at the Picnic Area, visitors can also hike to the east and follow a trail downriver. Unfortunately, this trail ends abruptly at the Morristown Line Bridge because there is no way to get past it. The edge of the bridge goes straight into the water and the tracks are elevated high off of the rest of the landscape and it would not be safe to cross them. To go under the bridge, large stepping stones would have to be placed in the river – this would require permits from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. An alternative to putting stones in the river would be to cantilever a walkway around the bridge; this would require cooperation from the New Jersey Department of Transportation. Another option to continue walking along the river would be to cross the Passaic at the Stanley Avenue Bridge, follow the river on the Chatham side, and then go under the tracks at River Road. A hiker could then follow the river for about another 0.4 miles until he reached a set of commercial properties that are developed right up to the riverfront.

## **Section 2: From Morristown Line Train Tracks to Watchung Avenue Bridge**

While this section of riverfront is also owned by Union County, it is narrower than in Section 1 and is more difficult to access. Starting at the rail road tracks, there is almost 300 feet of forested buffer between the river and the St. Teresa Cemetery.

The buffer narrows significantly moving eastward as the river moves behind several residential properties and then parallel to River Road. The forest changes in this area, it contains a denser understory in some areas with more brambles and poison ivy, on the ground and as vines on trees. Many mature hardwoods have large poison ivy vines on them. There are many invasive plant species on the road that are a result of disturbance, such as Tree-of-Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*). On the other side of River Road and up an embankment is a very large research-office facility currently owned by Merck.

There is a significant drop in elevation between the road and the river. There is not much room to walk in the woods at level with the road or along the road itself; it is easier to cut a path right along the river. However, the steep slope at the Watchung Avenue Bridge is difficult to climb and the interchange is not pedestrian friendly.

## **Section 3: From Watchung Avenue Bridge to Route 124**

Continuing eastward, the next 0.8 miles of the river flow past a Light Industry Zone that contains several pieces of unpreserved waterfront. This area contains office buildings, the City's Department of Public Works, an electrical substation, a manufacturing facility, and a resale shop. In this area the riparian buffer varies from being 160 feet wide to being virtually nonexistent. The riparian buffer consists mostly of deciduous forested wetland.

Starting from River Road, there is County owned land along the flood plain. This area is fairly broad, flat, and easy to walk. Unfortunately, the view across the river is not as attractive because of properties built very close to the river and a right-of-way for power lines with little vegetation.

The next piece of waterfront is an electrical substation owned by JCP&L. In a few places, the property has a riparian buffer. However along the northern edge of the property only a thin strip of trees and vegetation separates a parking lot from the river. The feasibility of putting a trail along the border of the substation property should be discussed with JCP&L. However, an alternative path could be made along the border of the JCP&L and Congregation Beth Hatikvah properties that would allow hikers to access Chatham Road. From there, a hiker could follow the road northward to the County owned property to the east of the Chatham Road Bridge. It should be noted that one challenge with the alternative route is that there is currently no sidewalk on either side of the road.

At the Chatham Road Bridge, hikers can continue eastward along the river on Union County Property all the way to Route 24. Though there is also a very thin buffer between the Department of Public Works facility and the river; the area would probably need to be wider to comfortably fit a trail here. As the river bends towards River Road, the elevation difference increases and in some places the river bank becomes fairly narrow and a bit more difficult to traverse. The steep slope also makes it difficult to leave the riverbank to get back onto the road until hikers reach the 180 River Road office building.

Along this section of River Road, at the time of the survey, there were several unoccupied properties and offices that were for sale or available for lease. These vacancies could provide an opportunity to

encourage and promote new businesses to the area that could have a connection to the river, such as, a canoe and kayak rental facility or outdoor equipment retailer. A new restaurant could have outdoor seating that faces the river. And other businesses can become more river oriented by providing outdoor space for employees and adopting management practices, such as, planting more shrubs and trees and less grass.

One of the challenges of this area is that River Road is very busy, difficult to cross, and lacks sidewalks near the residential areas. The road isolates the river from the rest of the community; driving along in the spring and summer, it is impossible to even know there is a river behind the shrubs and trees.

Another alternative route for this area would be at Martin Brook, hikers could follow it upstream to Metro Homes Field and the Carter House, a historic site.

### **A Blue Trail for Canoes and Kayaks**

Community members have expressed an interest in having better access to the river for canoes and kayaks. Access could be provided at the Stanley Avenue Bridge Picnic Area where there is a small dam east of the bridge. A spot for portage should be provided so boaters can get around the dam. Another potential access point would be at the Union County property east of the Chatham Road Bridge. The elevation difference between the river and road is not very large here, and there could be adequate room for parking. However creating boating access points is pointless if the river is not desnagged as many

large trees make boating very difficult. For a boater, the distance between these two potential access sites (1.4 miles) is fairly short. Summit should work with and encourage other towns up and down river to develop new access points as well in order to create a longer and more interesting blue trail.

### **Fishing**

Every Spring the New Jersey Department of Fish and Wildlife stocks the Passaic River with trout at the Stanley Avenue Bridge Picnic Area. At the 2009 Visioning Meeting, attendees expressed an interest in more spots that are accessible for fishing. Parking availability does limit where fishing access can be placed. There are several spots in Section 3 that could be candidates for access. As discussed in the Blue Trail description, the Union County property next to the Chatham Road Bridge has room for parking and a lower slope to reach the river. The stretch of river around Fay Place and Woodland Ave has numerous riffles which may make it a good place to fish. Parking options could include the nearby residential area, Summit Municipal Golf Course, and an office building parking lot that is close to the river.

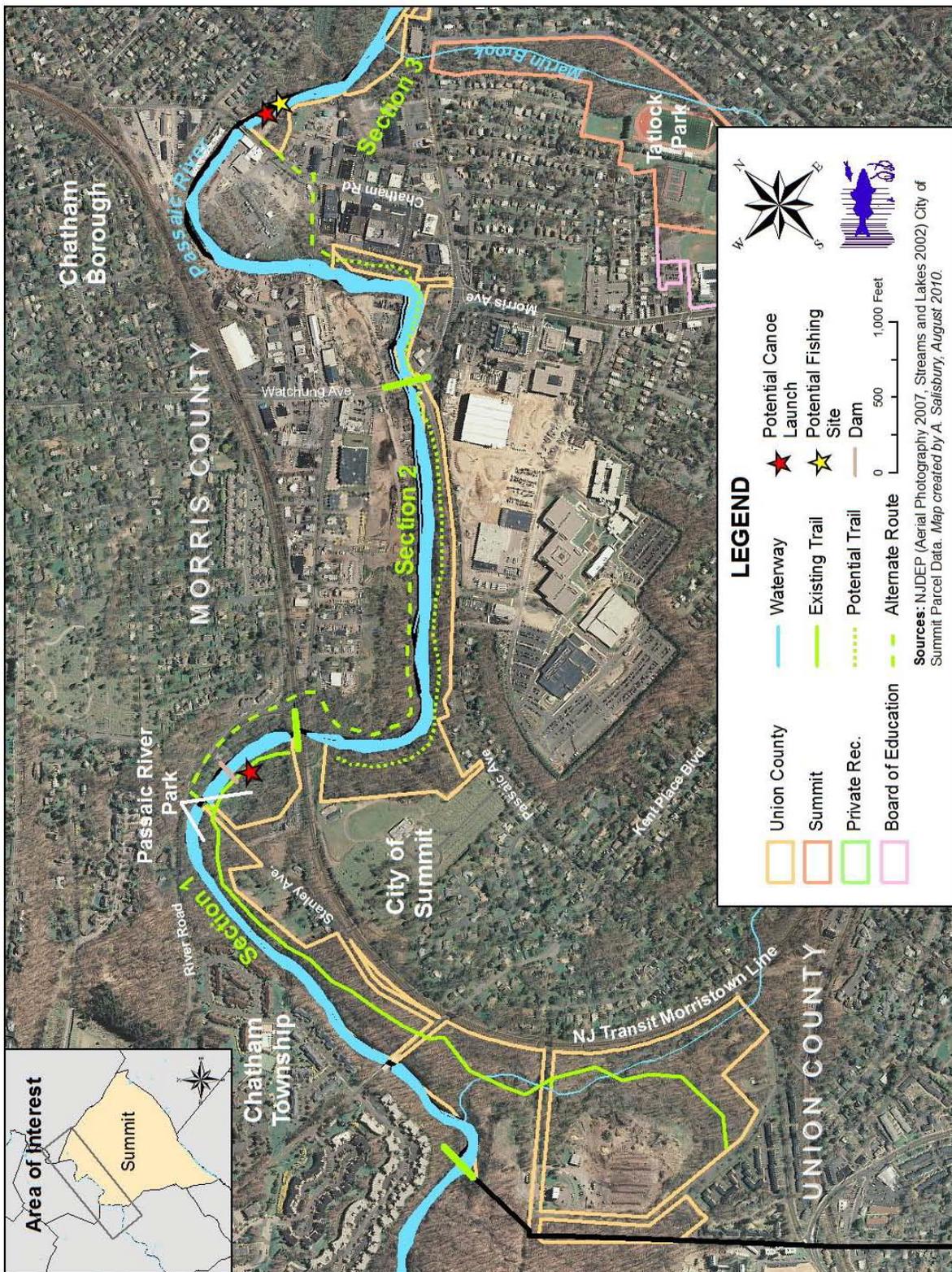
### **Recommendations**

1. Summit does have a riparian buffer ordinance that creates a 50-foot buffer around streams and rivers. There are several places along the Passaic River where development is very close to the 50-foot buffer or within it. The City should make sure that the buffer is not further encroached on.
2. To have a viable canoe and kayak trail, snags should be removed from the river. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has a general permit for snag removal that a town can apply for. Summit may find it helpful to work with other river towns and Union County in a joint desnagging effort.

3. Better canoe and kayak access was requested by attendees at the visioning meeting in 2009. The City should meet with Union County to discuss boat access on their properties. Summit should also investigate the permitting process that would be required to install a boat launch on the river.
4. Several potential fishing spots were suggested in the previous subsection. Summit should solicit feedback about these spots and other potential access points in order to site new fishing spots.
5. Summit should run an education program for landowners (both residential and commercial) near the river about practices that are good and bad for the river. De-icing practices and alternatives should be discussed particularly with commercial land owners who have large parking lots near the river.
6. Summit should reach out to neighboring New Providence to discuss partnership opportunities for extending trails and creating more canoe and kayak access points.

APPENDICES

FIGURE A-1: SUMMIT RIVERFRONT AND POTENTIAL GREENWAY, PART A



APPENDICES

FIGURE A-2: SUMMIT RIVERFRONT AND POTENTIAL GREENWAY, PART B

