

Project improves access to Still River in New Milford



Volunteers from Aquarion Water Company and the Still River Water Shed Connection Summer Crew, which is overseen by the Housatonic Valley Association, completed landscaping and finishing touches on a new Still River Canoe Launch in New Milford. This launch provides an uninterrupted Still River Water Trail linking other river access points in Brookfield and Danbury.

Photos: Trish Haldin



Designer and co-owner of Earth Tones in Woodbury, Lisa Turoczi, gives direction to the volunteers working on landscaping and finishing touches on a new Still River Canoe Launch in New Milford. This launch provides an uninterrupted Still River Water Trail linking other river access points in Brookfield and Danbury.



Maria Grace from the HVA and her son, Elden Grace (age 6), from Sharon, help plant white meadow rue at the new Still River Canoe Launch in New Milford. This launch provides an uninterrupted Still River Water Trail linking other river access points in Brookfield and Danbury.



Mike Jastremski, water shed conservation director for HVA, plants a Viburnum bush at the new Still River Canoe Launch in New Milford. This launch provides an uninterrupted Still River Water Trail linking other river access points in Brookfield and Danbury.



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By Katrina Koerting

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NEW MILFORD — A week ago, the space next to the animal shelter on Erickson Road was an open field with a sharp drop off to the Still River and banked by woods.

On Tuesday, that area had been transformed to have a gradual slope to the edge of the river made of gravel and lined with large, flat rocks. Teen stewards, volunteers from Aquarion Water Co., employees from Earth Tones and members of the Housatonic Valley Association moved throughout the space, planting native plants and adding mulch along the new canoe and kayak access site.

The work is part of the association's larger mission of improving the health of the Still River and surrounding watershed.

"Improving the water quality makes it easier to get out for recreation and getting people on the water means they're excited to preserve the river," said Mike Jastremski, the association's watershed conservation director. "We have a lot of kids who live in the watershed that don't know the river is there."

The project is meant to make it easier for people to use the river and helps connect the water trail. The nearest access points to the Still River are 5.85 miles away near the Four Corners in Brookfield and 3.12 miles away where it flows into the Housatonic River. This means that prior to the project, there was about nine miles of river that were difficult to access.

"You had to go down the steep bank or carry your boat through the woods before," Jastremski said. "It wasn't easy."

Lisa Turoczi, co-owner of Earth Tones and the project designer, said the site was created to allow easy access, as well as prevent pollutants from running into the river from the lawn, road or roof of the shelter. It uses a bioswale and allows the runoff to percolate into the ground and filter before entering the river.

The large flat rocks were designed to protect the bank from rising waters, as well as provide seating.

"If you don't have a canoe and kayak, you can still sit and enjoy the river," Turoczi said. "It's very beautiful."

She said she hopes it can be an educational tool too on using native plants and preventing stormwater runoff.

"Sometimes people have the connotation that native plants are just weedy, but they're very important," she said. "They are beautiful. They have vibrant colors and you can design with them."

The access-point project started as a grant proposal from the King's Mark and Conservationist and Development program about 10 years ago. The town inherited the project a few years later and asked the association to take it on a couple years ago.

Members of the Housatonic Valley Association and Mayor David Gronbach said they were excited to see the project finally happen.

"Paddling the Still River is like stepping back in time and we are excited to offer residents and visitors the opportunity to explore," Gronbach said.

It came together this year with grants from the Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation and the Natural Resources Damages Fund, which was set up as part of General Electric's cleanup of PCBs in the Housatonic River.

There were also a lot of hands available to make the project a reality.

This was the first time teens spending the summer with the Still River Watershed Connections program were able to be involved in a large construction project. The program, now in its second year, provides environmental education and job skills to Danbury teens. It is coordinated by the association, Danbury Youth Services and the Still River Alliance Commission of Danbury.

Kevin Cajamarca, 14, of Danbury, said he decided to join the connections program because he enjoys learning about the environment and wanted to gain work experience. He's enjoyed learning about the watershed and the ecosystems within and hopes people gain an appreciation for the resource as well.

Cajamarca and four other teens involved in the project will be sharing what they learned during their time with the program at a presentation at the Still River Greenway at 10 a.m. on Wednesday.

"I really want people to take care of the river," Cajamarca said. "When we were cleaning the river I was disgusted when I pulled out tires and a mattress."

The group spent most of its time this summer on the Still River Greenway in Danbury, removing invasive plants and pulling items from the river.

"We've come a long way, but there's still a way to go," said Joe Zipparo, the crew leader for the connections program.

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