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Legislators want help in cleaning up Mystic River

By Michael Norton

Mon Sep 24, 2007, 07:27 PM EDT

BOSTON - State representatives from densely populated communities that host a pair of major rivers in eastern Massachusetts called on their colleagues Monday to fund rehabilitation efforts for the polluted waterways.

Noting the Mystic River received a “D” in its latest Environmental Protection Agency report card, Rep. Denise Provost (D-Somerville) said the river, due to its size – it spans parts of three counties and its watershed covers 76 square miles – lacks a single identifiable constituency to advocate for a cleanup.

Unlike the Charles River, which has a “more heightened” level of material and political support than the Mystic, she said, Mystic communities are more politically fragmented, poorer and “immigrant communities.”

Legislation (H 841) sponsored by Provost, former Sen. Jarrett Barrios and other lawmakers from districts along the river creates a Mystic River Water Quality Commission. Provost said she expected the commission would consolidate available information and agree on a water quality improvement plan, including cost estimates.

“The Mystic remains the river in eastern Massachusetts which has received the least attention and serious effort towards its cleanup,” Provost told members of the Legislature’s Committee on the Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture.

Provost said Medford, Cambridge and Winchester, which host non-tidal portions of the Mystic River, often face flood-related contamination due to sewer overflows and storm-water runoff in the Mystic’s eastern end, including communities like East Boston, Chelsea, Everett and Somerville

Committee co-chairwoman Rep. Pamela Resor (D-Acton) asked Provost whether the Mystic was represented by a watershed association like other rivers. Provost said it was but that the association depends on private funds. They agreed public funds would assist the association.

According to the Mystic River Watershed Association, the EPA has moved the Mystic Watershed to the top of its priority list and is investigating known polluters. The EPA determined that in 2006, the Mystic met water quality standards for swimming 52 percent of the time, and for boating 67 percent of the time. The association since 2000 has collected watershed water quality data from sites in Woburn, Winchester, Medford, Arlington, Belmont, Somerville, Malden and Medford.

Rep. Alice Wolf (D-Cambridge) urged committee members to help make the eastern end of the Charles River, where a public swim in July generated headlines, clean enough to swim in permanently. On New Year’s Eve, then-Lt. Gov. Kerry Healey vetoed a bill creating a Charles River Water Quality Commission. “So we’re starting again,” Wolf said.

In her testimony, Wolf said the Charles River is challenged by an algae problem and discharges from a

power plant that raise the river's temperature and, she said, contribute to that problem. Mirant Kendall plant owners claim algae blooms are a "relatively recent occurrence" while its water discharges have occurred at the same temperatures for more than 40 years.

Wolf said some Cambridge residents remember swimming at Magazine Beach. "Since 1955, there has not been any regular swimming," she said. Recalling this summer's one-mile Charles swim, which was capped at 100 participants, Wolf said, "I didn't swim but maybe I will the next time."

According to the Charles River Conservancy, the water in the river "is now clean enough for swimming," but methods must be established to "ensure that swimmers will not come in contact with contaminated sediments found on the river bottom."

Both the Mystic and Charles commission bills call for recommendations by Feb. 1, 2008.

Also today, a top aide to Treasurer Timothy Cahill asked lawmakers to allow a trust that finances water pollution and drinking water infrastructure to also use low-interest loans to finance environmental projects in areas like brownfields, renewable energy, landfill capping, noise abatement, open space acquisition, dam repairs, and air pollution.

Under legislation filed by former Patrick administration economic development official and former Rep. Robert Coughlin (D-Dedham), now the president of the Massachusetts Biotechnology Council, a Massachusetts Environmental Facilities Trust would be created.

According to Scott Jordan, executive director of the Massachusetts Water Pollution Abatement Trust, the legislation would modernize and clarify statutes, making the trust's status as an independent authority clear while expanding its board, which is chaired by Cahill, to include another Cahill appointee and another appointee from Gov. Deval Patrick.

Jordan credited the trust with helping to finance \$3.9 billion worth of drinking water and wastewater infrastructure projects over the past decade through loans, which had been issued at zero interest but which now come with 2 percent interest. Projects have led to water quality improvements in the Merrimac, Ipswich and Blackstone rivers, he said. "We're probably the biggest bank that no one's ever heard of," Jordan said.

Resor called the trust's expansion a "great idea," but said she was concerned about over-expanding the trust's mission and hoped the state could return to zero-interest loans since the 2 percent rate is a "hurdle" for many local projects.

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