

Plenty of help is available to reclaim and protect streams

By CHARLOTTE BARTIZEK
Post Correspondent

The Bowman's Creek Watershed Association is a good example of how volunteers can improve conditions on a local waterway.

The group was formed when the Noxen-Monroe Sportsman's Association and the Stanley Cooper Chapter of Trout Unlimited became interested in protecting Bowman's Creek. Established in 1998, it enjoys the support of 12 municipalities and the two counties that Bowman's Creek flows through, and partners with 14 other organizations and agencies.

The association annually limes the creek to reduce the acidity of the water, and is in the process of completing handicapped access to the stream with a \$32,000 grant from the "Growing Greener" state fund.

The process begins by engaging a volunteer core group with elected officers and filing for tax-free status with the state, says Dorne White, of Noxen, a founder of the association. "You need volunteers, and people; you just can't do it all yourself," he says.

White says the Bowman's Creek Association receives "in-kind services from municipalities, technical help from the Department of Environmental Protection, and assistance in applying for grants from state representatives."

He is in the process of helping to start another watershed group on Tunkhannock Creek, or perhaps two, one for the lower and one for the upper creek.

Startup money for the Bowman's

Creek Association came from the Eastern Coalition of Mine Reclamation.

The initial funds were used to print brochures, attract membership and produce a video of Bowman's Creek. The group sought membership at the Luzerne and Wyoming County fairs and through civic and municipal groups.

Karen Szwasz is coordinator for the Hicks Creek Watershed Association, serving a stream that flows from the top of Peters Mountain down through Exeter and into the Susquehanna River. This relatively new group formed in 2002 as a result of an Exeter Borough cleanup and the concerns of individuals living along the creek's banks.

"People had problems, there was erosion and slides on the upper part of the watershed and sedimentation and stagnant water downstream," says Szwasz. "The mine companies rerouted the creek and it's probably the only creek running north. Of course, we had West Nile virus as a result."

The watershed group boasts 130 members and has been approved for a \$46,000 DEP Growing Greener grant to do a stream assessment and design a plan to prioritize the problems.

"It's a lot of work but worthwhile. I stepped in because these people needed help," says Szwasz. To keep members informed of activities, the group publishes a monthly newsletter.

Other state and federal groups are assisting the Hicks Creek group, and can help any watershed organization. Locally, the Wyoming Valley Watershed Coalition helps coordinate

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Project manager for watershed associations
Pennsylvania Environmental Council.

and establish watershed groups.

Holly Frederick is project manager for watershed associations at the regional office of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. "I think people are interested in these creeks and watersheds, but so far they have considered them burdens, to maintain the bridges for example," she said. "They should see them as opportunities, for fishing spots and picnic areas."

Part of the the Susquehanna River Basin Commission's strategic plan is to restore, manage and protect watershed areas. Along those lines, the commission can help environmental and civic groups, municipalities and smaller watershed organizations organize stream cleanups. They provide mini-grants of up to \$2,000 to help watershed groups with these events, one of which was held in April on a section of Toby's Creek in Dallas Borough.

One of their outreaches is too "assure the sustainability of these grassroots groups in the Susquehanna River Basin," according to Susan Obleski, communications director.

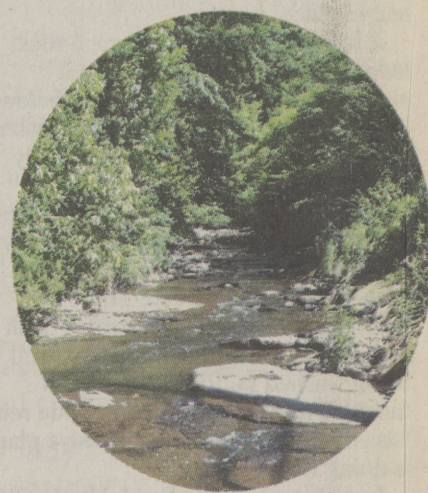
The commission also assists with stream assessment and water quality sampling. "We have contracted legal and technical assistance to help groups starting out and we do on-site workshops," says Anne Devine, watershed liaison, for the commission.

"Most recently we have established, on line, a GIS (Geological Information Service) mapping service with a grant from the state DEP that should be of great help to these groups starting up," she says. Their website is www.srbc.net (see programs and activities).

Some evaluative work has already been done in Toby's Creek and may be available to future endeavors. For the past three years Toby's Creek has been monitored by Dr. Dale Bruns, dean of Wilkes University's College of Science and Engineering Department and a group of students, through an EPA grant to study tributaries that empty into the Susquehanna.

"I can't say that Toby's Creek is pristine, but it's a good model and reference point to compare in a study involving other streams in Luzerne County. It hasn't suffered from the severe mining influences we see in the valley," says Bruns.

Toby's Creek's turbidity, acidity, oxygen levels and temperature seem in the normal range as far as Bruns has studied it. The stream is monitored every 15 minutes with instruments installed on the stream that send data directly to Wilkes University. Aerial photographs and ground surveys were completed in 2000. This accumulated data would be available to any interested local



Toby's Creek

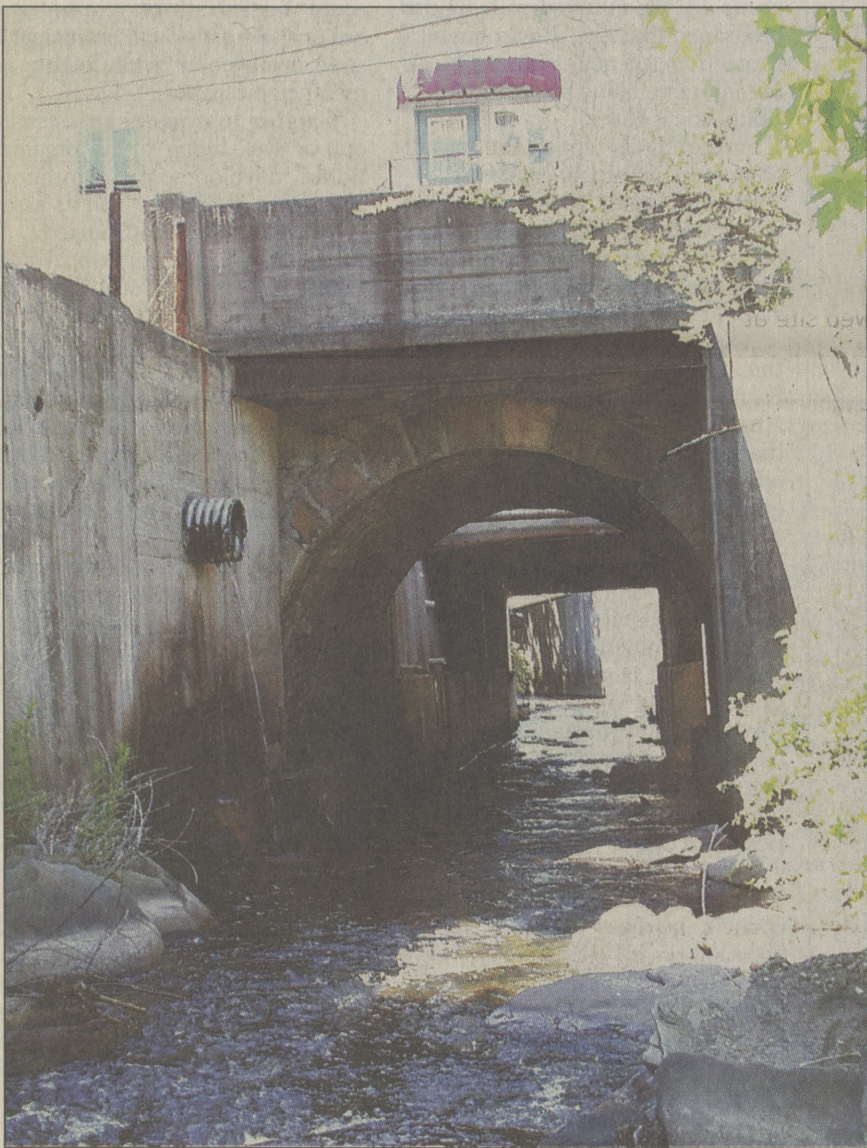
Our hidden resource

group.

Though optimistic about Toby's Creek's condition, Bruns cautions that the amount of dissolved solids from salted roads needs to be looked at each spring and land use still needs to be monitored in order for the creek to remain healthy.

"Toby's Creek, with good stream management, could have economic benefit to the area in terms of tourism and just through the enjoyment residents could get from it," says Bruns.

When it rains, Toby's Creek pours



POST PHOTOS/RON BARTIZEK

Change in character. The photo at left was taken in the spring, showing a docile Toby's Creek at the Center Street bridge. The photo at right was taken in September, at the height of flooding caused by six inches of rain from the remnants of Hurricane Ivan.

Usually placid creek can pack a punch

By RONALD BARTIZEK
Post Staff

Most of the time, Toby's Creek is tame, even invisible, with water levels that barely cover the shale lining its bed. But when the rains come hard, long or both, watch out. Quickly swollen by runoff, the tranquil stream can become a destructive menace, capable of ripping apart roads and washing away property.

In the record flooding of June, 1972, the creek tore up sections of Memorial Highway in Dallas and Hillside Road in Trucksville, before causing even more damage from Luzerne to Edwardsville, where it enters the Susquehanna River.

Last month, swollen by about six inches of rain dropped by the remnants of Hurricane Ivan, the creek jumped its banks in Shavertown, flooding North Main Street and the parking lot at Cook's Pharmacy and coming perilously close to topping the channel between several homes and Route 309. It is the Back Mountain's good fortune that nowhere is the torrent's flow blocked, and thus it simply washes through on its way to the river.

A variety of piecemeal measures have been taken over the years to contain and direct flood waters. At several points, the creek has been channeled by high concrete walls; at others, Gabian walls — stone secured by heavy wire mesh — hold the banks while at still others rip rap stone is the protection of choice.

About a decade ago, local municipalities were required to adopt a storm water management ordinance that applies to construction within the creek's watershed, said Ben Gorey, a past zoning officer in Kingston Township. The ordinance requires that developers not increase storm flows, often by capturing it in detention ponds on their sites.

"That should be a good control over runoff," Gorey said.

There is also a state-imposed restriction of any development within 50 feet of any stream, which Gorey feels helps protect tributaries to Toby's Creek.

Now, a comprehensive approach to mitigate flooding along Toby's Creek and its feeder streams may be on the way, thanks to State Sen. Charles Lemmond.

Tom Rathbun, spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection, said a preliminary study is nearly finished — 16 years after funding of \$150,000 for it was set aside by



FOR THE POST/CHARLOTTE BARTIZEK

Friends Matt Krebs, left, and Dale Daniels, relax on a Sunday afternoon on Toby's Creek in Shavertown. They are sitting atop a Gabian wall, stones held together by wire mesh, a design that is used at many points to protect the banks from erosion.

the state Legislature.

The study is under review at DEP and the Department of General

Services, which manages construction of state-funded projects.

Because the study has just been submitted, Rathbun was unable to describe its recommendations. But he expects officials in Dallas Borough and Dallas and Kingston townships to be given a review soon. "They'll be able to see the scope of it," he said.

A decision on whether to proceed should be made in January, 2005.

Rathbun said this approach — trying to eliminate the causes of flooding rather than simply protecting vulnerable locations — is more effective. "Otherwise, you just keep trying to out-engineer Mother Nature," he said.

Funding for the project would be split between federal, state and local sources, with the local municipalities responsible for ongoing maintenance and upkeep. "It's a bit of a financial commitment," Rathbun said. Grant funds would be available for non-routine repairs or useful additions.

While DEP would consider the environmental impact of such a project, other support is valuable when trying to incorporate public access into the plan.

"That's where the local watershed groups are vital," he said.

And DEP could help such a group get started and be effective. "There's funding sources for those folks."

Web resources

Government and nonprofit agencies

Pennsylvania Environmental Council
www.pecpa.org

Susquehanna River Basin Commission
www.srbc.net

Luzerne County Conservation District
www.luzerneconservationdistrict.org

Local environmental organizations

North Branch Land Trust
www.nblt.org

Back Mountain Trail
bmt.edithispage.com

Watershed associations

Eno River Association (Durham, N.C.)
www.enoriver.org

Farmington River Watershed Association (Farmington, Ct.)
www.frwa.org

Harlem Valley Rail Trail (Amenia, N.Y.)
www.hvrt.org

DO YOU HAVE ANY STORIES ABOUT TOBY'S CREEK?

At different times and places, Toby's Creek has been a fishing hole, a natural sliding board and an engine of industry. If you have any stories to tell or pictures to share, we'd love to hear and see them. They may be published in the weeks following the completion of this series.

You can contact us many ways: By e-mail (best): thepost@leader.net By phone: (570) 675-5211 By mail: The Post, 15 N. Main St., Wilkes-Barre PA 18711

Items may also be dropped off in our locked box at the Uni-Mart convenience store, across from the Dallas Shopping Center.

No matter how you contact us, please include a return address and phone number, so that we can follow up with you and return items.

What do you think?

So, using your own experience and what we've presented, what do you think about the future of Toby's Creek? Is it simply a nuisance that should be tamed and paved over, or could it be a valuable asset to the Back Mountain's families and business community?

In the end, how the creek is used — if it is used at all — will depend on what the people who live, work and do business here feel is best.

Send your comments to us by e-mail at: thepost@leader.net or by mail: The Post, 15 N. Main St., Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711