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Their mission: Protect the Woonasquatucket

• The goal of the new Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council is to revitalize the river and the communities that surround it, from North Smithfield to Providence.

BY THOMAS J. MORGAN

Journal Staff Writer

SMITHFIELD -- Half of the land drained by the Woonasquatucket River as it wends 18 miles from its headwaters in North Smithfield to its confluence with the Providence River at Waterplace Park lies in Smithfield.

That's a fact not generally known. Also not exactly in the spotlight -- yet -- is the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, a new organization that is still on its shakedown cruise along the lazy Woonasquatucket.

"We are still figuring out who we are and what our mission is," said Jennifer Pereira, council director. "But generally we are working to revitalize the river and the surrounding communities."

The council is operating under a one-year, \$50,000 grant from the Rhode Island Foundation. It is awaiting certification as a nonprofit organization.

The watershed group got a friendly reception recently when Pereira outlined the organization's goals for the Town Council. Former President Clinton, in effect, launched the council in 1998 by designating the Woonasquatucket River as 1 of only 14 American Heritage rivers.

The watershed extends through North Smithfield, Johnston, North Providence, Providence, and includes a small slice of Glocester.

The council's areas of interest include environmental, economic and historic issues, Pereira said.

One of its projects involves helping its member communities identify open space areas that they seek to protect, working under a \$100,000 grant that the state Department of Environmental Management received from the U.S. Forestry Service, Pereira said.

It's not just riverbank property that falls within the council's bailiwick; it's the entire area where gravity draws excess moisture downhill in a grand recycling operation between the land and the sea.

"Whatever happens to the land does affect the river," Pereira said, which is why the council also will be keeping an eye on such federal Superfund cleanup sites as the one in Centredale near the now-breached Allendale Dam, site of a former chemical factory.

There are 15 members on the council, representing all the communities in the watershed. The council's headquarters is in the Monohasset Mill building, on Kinsley Avenue in Providence.

Pereira said the council is applying for grants, and hopes to obtain financial support from its member communities.

"It would be wonderful to get some support from them," she said. "We understand the funding limitations right now by the towns. We will work with town planners and figure out the best timing to approach the towns. In the meantime, we want to do a lot more outreach and education, and raise awareness."

Volunteers who are interested in serving on the council or in such projects as cleanups are welcome to call Pereira at 861-9046.

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