

Teams of youth lay groundwork for major Spicket River cleanup

◆ The Youth Corps began mapping the river July 20.

By Shawn Regan
Eagle-Tribune Writer

LAWRENCE — Automobile parts. Washing machines and dryers. Sofas. Bicycles. Enough shopping carts to equip a Wal-Mart. Green plastic bags filled with garbage. Refrigerators, stoves and even a kitchen sink.

Take a walk along the shores of the Spicket River in Lawrence and it's amazing what you'll see littering the winding waterway.

"It's absolutely bizarre. My jaw just dropped when I saw what's in there," said Reuben Allen, 24, of Idaho, team leader of a small band of National Civilian Community Corps volunteers who have spent the last week mapping the river for a major cleanup planned this fall. "I've never seen anything like it in my life."

Allen's team arrived in Lawrence from Maryland two weeks ago to join a group of five to eight local Youth Volunteer Corps teenagers cleaning the city. The national team originally included nine people ages 18 to



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Youth Volunteer Corps' Jonathan Grassis, 20, of Dracut, makes his way along the Spicket River picking up trash as National Civilian Community Corps worker Christianna Fiocco, 19, of San Diego, Calif., paddles the river in a kayak near Jackson Street in Lawrence.

24, but two were recently sent to Arizona to help fight forest fires and three to Texas to assist with catastrophic floods.

In addition to mapping the river, the kids cleaned a portion

of the North Canal and a room at the Immigrant City Archives. They also helped restore a retaining wall on Marston Street. This week, they will be performing similar work in Haverhill,

including cleaning the Dogwood and Shawsheen trails. The national team will head back to Maryland Friday.

The Youth Corps began mapping the Spicket July 20, paddling off in kayaks from the river's only publically accessible point behind Central Catholic High School with about a dozen others from various city organizations and neighborhood groups. The map they are making includes information such as the dirtiest parts of the river and where large debris are located.

When it's completed, the map will be turned over to GroundWorks Lawrence, a nonprofit organization that provides planning and technical assistance aimed at building parks and a path linking parks and green spaces along the city's waterways. GroundWorks is planning the fall clean-up along with Community Works, the North Common Neighborhood Association and other volunteers.

In Lawrence, the Spicket flows from the Gateway district to the Methuen border, meandering though North Lawrence, from Stevens Pond, behind Malden Mills, to Marston and Canal streets. It winds for almost three

Please see **YOUTHS**, Page 4

Continued from Page 3

miles through the city and cuts through the heavily populated Arlington and North Common neighborhoods. It is in most places hidden by overgrown foliage and buildings and obstructed by an 8-foot-tall chain-link fence. In all places, it is dirty and strewn with debris.

But instead of the bags of garbage and large pieces of metal scattered along the shoreline, some see great potential.

"I was amazed at the paradox between the beauty of the setting and all the junk that's in the river," said Christianna Fiocco, 19, of San

Diego, Calif. "I think what we're doing is going to make a difference. The river could be beautiful one day with work."

Mariana Guicho, 14, of Lawrence, said she has seen the Spicket up close before, but didn't remember it ever looking so bad.

"It's a fun way to spend the summer," she said of her time spent with Youth Volunteer Corps, an arm of the Merrimack Valley Community Service Corps, which includes kids from Lawrence and Haverhill.

"We're trying to do our part to change people's perception that Lawrence is a dirty city," Guicho said.

Allen said he hopes the national youth service group will send another team to Lawrence next year.

"I'm going to encourage our officials to get another team in here as soon as possible," said the recent Idaho State graduate. "Lawrence definitely needs the help."

To help with the fall clean-up or make suggestions about what you would like to see happen along the Spicket River, call Marianne E. Paley, executive director of GroundWorks Lawrence, at (978) 974-0770. To learn more about National Civilian Community Corps, visit its Website at www.americorps.com.

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