



Tuesday, September 3, 2002

Trying to redeem a stream

A river runs through it.

Actually, three rivers run through Lawrence. But the one that tends to get all the attention is the Merrimack. It is, after all, the divider between North and South Lawrence. It is what attracted the builders of all those mammoth mills. At 100 yards wide, you can't miss it. It is so much bigger than the modest Spicket.

You can easily miss the Spicket. In fact, you frequently have to go looking for it on its three-mile meander through North Lawrence, from Stevens Pond in the northeast corner all the way across to where it empties into the Merrimack, close to Lawrence General Hospital. It doesn't even show up on many street maps. It is hidden by scrub vegetation in some areas, fenced off in most others.

And that could be one of the reasons the Spicket practically bleeds rather than flows through the city's poorest neighborhoods. It could be a shaded escape from the heat and madness of an urban summer, a small slice of nature cutting through a world of asphalt, a soothing rush of water to mask the mechanical hum of traffic. It could allow the residents of those three-deckers that back up to it to brag about living in riverfront property.

But, as everyone knows, it is none of those things. It is, most fundamentally, an unregulated dump. If it were a landfill, the state probably would have ordered it closed and capped. If it were a relative, it would be kept out of sight in a padded room -- an embarrassment to the family. It has been violated so many times by so many things that its advocates lose track of trying to list what's in there. The range of detritus is stunning, from major appliances to auto parts, furniture, shopping carts, bottles, cans, bikes, boards, bats and balls. There is metal, plastic, wood and concrete. If it's something people throw away, you can probably find it in the Spicket. And that doesn't even count the grease and gas-flecked water that pours into it from storm drains when it rains.

As a recreational asset, it is a bad joke -- a threat to health and

safety. Anybody who is silly or careless enough to swim or wade unprotected in it risks disease or infection.

But into this sordid, slimy little creek is wading (figuratively for the most part) a small army of local nonprofits who are convinced that if they can just get area residents to notice the Spicket, they will start to care about it. That on a single day in late October they can marshal enough volunteers to clean its banks of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of foreign objects. That they can qualify for a \$10,000 grant that will help them haul more than 200 tires and truckloads of other garbage out of the water. That they can dredge a channel down its center to make it easier for kayaks and canoes to navigate. That a path can be built along its banks for residents to walk. That its borders can be transformed into a greenway through one of the grayest portions of the city.

In short, that nothing, not even the Spicket, is beyond redemption.

At the head of this little army is Groundwork Lawrence, one of those numerous nonprofits funded by a combination of government and private grants, whose goal is to improve the quality of life in stressed, urban areas. From their little office on Island Street, they have plans, maps, strategies and, most important, contact with various neighborhood groups.

The first big push is Oct. 26, when the goal is simply to clean everything along the Spicket's banks. What's in the water will come later.

They need volunteers. So, this is a chance, for one day, for area residents to do something about their quality of life, instead of just complaining about it.

Groundworks' number is (978) 974-0770. Give them a call. Do it for yourself and your neighbors. Redeem the river.

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