

# Housatonic Valley Greenway And River Trail Management Plan



**ADOPTED BY HVCEO ON 9/15/2006**

LOCATED IN DANBURY, BROOKFIELD, NEW MILFORD, BRIDGEWATER AND NEWTOWN, CT

## A. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Since its inception in 2001 the mission of the Housatonic Valley River Trail (HVRT) planning process has been to promote canoe and kayak use on the Still and Housatonic Rivers. The effort has sought to enhance water based recreation, nature education, tourism and environmental experience.

The River Trail designation was originally made by the Housatonic Valley Economic Development Partnership (HVEDP), a group now inactive. A former HVEDP employee, Peg Daley of Newtown, was the key advocate for the Trail then and now.

While the Still River and Housatonic River were already available to serve recreational needs before the advent of the River Trail planning process, the specific purpose of "Trail" creation has been to create access points for paddlers, increase user safety, and then to promote the development of new put in and take out points on these rivers.



**Source: Housatonic Valley Paddle Club**

River Trail development was and remains part of the Housatonic Region's economic development strategy: retention of workforce, to appeal to persons considering employment in the area, to provide a closer to home recreational destination, to attract visitors, and to enhance regional name recognition.

There are an exceptional few in our area who must shoot the Grand Canyon for a peak lifetime thrill. Rather, most of our residents want to paddle close to home and close to nature, and to relax while doing so. The River Trail and adjacent Danbury, Brookfield and New Milford riverside walking trails will serve localized everyday recreation, a partial substitute for vacations to distant places.

It is important to note that the Trail is not, and may never be, a continuous uninterrupted paddle throughout its length. On the Still River two significant rapids prevent this, and portages there may be slow to develop.

But on the Housatonic River where the Bleachery, Shepaug and Stevenson dams are encountered, portages have been successfully developed. The definition of "portage" is "the carrying of boats and

supplies overland between two waterways.”

Access barriers include obtaining public right of way, avoidance and remediation of eroding areas, and the often distinct lack of easy to use and shallow transition zones between riverbank and water (**see photo**). Thus carefully designed put in and take out launch areas require much planning and thought.

Looking back, development activities during the HVEDP sponsorship were most active between 2001 and 2003. A brochure and web site were created.



***Trail advocates Mark Cummings and Peg Daley installing the first River Trail sign 12/2001***

However, the HVEDP lost all of its funding and after June of 2004 government sponsored planning for the River Trail went inactive. But then in January of 2005 the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials (HVCEO) took up the continuation of planning for the Housatonic Valley River Trail.

HVCEO has organized the HVRT as a coordinating planning process only; it does not own any related property or equipment, or undertake any maintenance, or provide insurance for volunteers organized by other groups.

To focus credit where credit is due, key supporters of River Trail development have been River Trail Manager Margaret Daley of Newtown, Jack Kozuchowski of the Danbury Health Department, and Mark Cummings of King's Mark.

The prime purpose of this HVCEO River Trail Management Plan is to offer coordination of this complex process. It is also of value in attracting, and then thanking, volunteers and financial contributors. Such persons can now see that there is an organized, staged and long term approach to River Trail development. Also, that their contributions are permanently recognized in the five detailed Trail inventories of features and development issues.

Municipal participants and others also prefer to see that the recreational resource being developed is following a logical management plan.

## **B. RELATIONSHIP TO STILL RIVER GREENWAYS**

The Still River Greenway is a riverbank recreational facility of the City of Danbury. The Danbury Greenway is located in northeastern Danbury and runs along the western and then eastern banks of the Still River from the Commerce Park business area north to the Brookfield Town Line. The starting point for the River Trail is just downstream from the starting point of Danbury's Still River Greenway.



To the north, the Brookfield Greenway is planned to link to the Danbury portion and run throughout

Brookfield. The 2002 Brookfield Plan of Conservation and Development proposed that a Brookfield extension of the Danbury Still River Greenway connect to the Danbury Greenway and proceed northerly thru Brookfield to New Milford.

As the kayak and canoe oriented River Trail and the two pedestrian oriented Greenways parallel each other, there has been much coordinated planning, with some Greenway features serving as attractions to paddlers. The Greenways also provide access for annual River Trail clean-ups and access for emergency responders to paddlers.

Development of riverside trails in Danbury and Brookfield and eventually New Milford will be coordinated with River Trail planning and development.

## C. ROLE OF KING'S MARK

The Council of the **King's Mark Resource Conservation and Development Area**, a 501(c)3 non profit organization based in Wallingford, CT and dating from the early 1970's, assisted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and serving western Connecticut, has been a consistent supporter of Housatonic Valley River Trail development.

The RC&D Coordinator is Mark Cummings. HVCEO's appointed representative to the King's Mark Council is River Trail Director Peg Daley.

While King's Mark must logically spread its efforts thru many towns, our area has been fortunate in that King's Mark has included River Trail projects in many of its annual work plans. For FY2006, a very favorable 25% of that organization's work plan is Housatonic Valley River Trail related.

Importantly, King's Mark has the skills to design, obtain permits for and build a riverside recreational enhancement. In each case it retains no maintenance or ownership responsibilities, which must be accepted by others for the project to be built.

King's Mark also provides the single day insurance for volunteers when clean up or ramp construction events are held. Also, it serves as banker for donations directed to River Trail projects.

While Kings Mark resources are often stretched thin, this River Trail Management Plan recommends that the Housatonic Region express appreciation for the great value of what has been received and continue to request assistance.

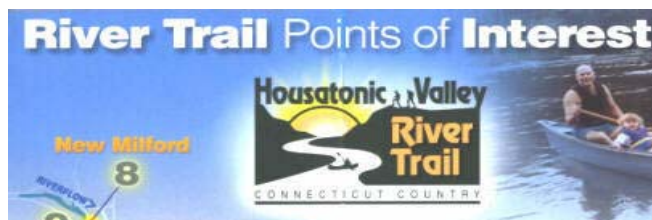
## D. PROMOTIONAL AND GRANT ACTIVITIES

While physical development of the Trail is obviously crucial, promotion of the resource newly available is of course also needed. The least cost strategy will be to make all information for River Trail users available for downloading over the web.

This Management Plan proposes that to avoid duplicative costs, HVCEO incorporate the River Trail web site into its own regional web site at [hvceo.org/rivertrail.php](http://hvceo.org/rivertrail.php). Appreciation is expressed to Newtown High School for hosting the River Trail's first web site over a number of years.

As accomplished by Mrs. Daley, the Appalachian Mountain Club's (AMC) 2006 Paddle Plan will include the Trail. In addition, the Northwest CT Convention & Visitors Bureau that manages tourism for the region has been contacted to help with River Trail promotion.

The River Trail Manager, King's Mark, and others will be urged to continue to obtain grants for Trail development. Importantly, a copy of this Management Plan can be provided to each potential donor.



As noted above, a purpose of this Management Plan will be to effectively demonstrate that donations will be part of an organized and efficient development process. For all major donations, the name of the group or individual will be permanently recorded in the accompanying inventories.

This Management Plan supports "Paddle Days" fund raisers sponsored by the Trading Post of New Milford as well as Housatonic Valley Paddle Club activities.

During FY2007 a CT DEP grant of \$3,300 will be used for promotional activities.

## **E. CLEAN UP ACTIVITIES**

The enduring beauty of the Housatonic Valley River Trail and parallel walking trails is dependent in part upon waterway and riverbank cleanliness. As noted King's Mark has provided liability insurance for volunteers working at these clean up events. But HVCEO is prevented by its insurance guidelines from being either an event co-sponsor or insurance agent for volunteers at event activities. A record of recent events includes:

— Early years saw various clean up days.

— Eastern Mountain Sports based at the Danbury Mall organized and sponsored a clean up of the Still River in Brookfield and Danbury on 5/21/05. Eighty five volunteers worked at the ramp and along the HVRT. The volunteers cleared the ramp at the Marriott Courtyard of silt build up. The Marriott Courtyard provided a free breakfast and "headquarters" for the day. Sixty tires and two thirty-yard dumpsters were filled that day, with another 20 tires removed the next week.

— Eastern Mountain Sports again sponsored a HVRT clean up on Saturday May 20, 2006 and the date for 2007 is to be Saturday May 19.

As for downed trees blocking the Still River, a plan for reporting them needs to be developed. A phone number and or email address should be publicized, directed to appropriate public works departments or other skilled organizations with appropriate insurance for resulting maintenance activities.



It should be noted that cleanup activities cannot be conducted in a regulatory vacuum. The precedent established for a Still River clean up on August 9, 2001 was for the removal of fallen trees to require permits from the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection and the Town of Brookfield.

One of the important details is to determine the logistics of which log to pick up first. All natural materials should be deposited far enough away that they will not end up back in the Still River after a severe storm. Logs are not to be seen as trash but rather left to decompose and provide shelter for wildlife. Garbage debris is to be removed.

## **F. STAFFING PLAN**

River Trail development is a cooperative process maintained by King's Mark, HVCEO, DEP and other grant sources, volunteers, and the municipalities of Danbury, Brookfield, New Milford, Bridgewater and Newtown.

This Management Plan proposes that HVCEO continue to assist by proving annual funding for a part time River Trail Manager, who is then available to coordinate all of the cooperating partners and interested parties.

## G. PADDLER INPUT AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE

This Management Plan proposes that HVCEO establish a River Trail Advisory Committee and that the Project Manager organize periodic meetings.

An important source of input to the Committee and overall River Trail planning may be members of the **Housatonic Valley Paddle Club**.

## H. SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

The River Trail provides a little bit of wilderness close to home. But as with municipal forests and parks, emergency help is not always available within shouting distance.

In addition the meandering nature of the Still River, heavy foliage in some areas, and lack of landmarks can make for challenges in keeping track of location. In contrast the Housatonic River with its wide hydropower lakes has good vistas and orientation is much less of a challenge.

It will thus be of continuing importance during the planning process for signs and identification of landmarks to be provided to paddlers so they know where they are on the two rivers.

The River Trail planning process also needs to develop an understanding with local emergency response personnel as to the location of access points on the Still River in case of a medical emergency. While police and ambulance personnel are provided with copies of HVRT maps for clean up days, this communication should be broadened to include information about more of the Trail distributed on a periodic basis.

Consideration of emergency response factors is incorporated into the River Trail's five detailed inventory sections, where emergency access has been made a continuing River Trail planning factor.

Rapids requiring portages have always been an impediment to boating on the Still River. The River Trail planning process is the first public effort to add signs warning paddlers of these historic hazards.



It is also advised to give as much visibility as possible to put in and take out locations. While the river edge is not always easily visible, where geographically possible this should be considered. Such visibility will be partly to prevent vandalism and partly to reduce the risk of robbery, etc.

## I. RISK AND LIABILITY

River Trail development under HVEDP involved coordination of recreational interests and the pursuit of grants. Importantly, HVEDP purchased no property and signed no maintenance agreements.

To exclude liabilities beyond those covered by its current insurance policy, it is necessary that HVCEO as a planning and coordination agency also avoid accepting any such direct responsibilities. This Management Plan therefore requires this limitation.

To remain within its CIRMA insurance policy, HVCEO will conduct all Housatonic Valley River Trail planning within the following guidelines and limitations:

*1) For its period of River Trail planning, the HVEDP retains the liability for the conduct of and results of its activities. Although inactive, HVEDP remains legally viable as a subdivision of the state created by state statute. HVCEO declares that it has not inherited or accepted any of HVEDP's assets or liabilities relative*

to the River Trail planning process or any other aspect of HVEDP work.

**2)** HVCEO or its staff and agents will not undertake maintenance activities at River Trail put ins or take outs, along riverside pathways, river blockages, etc. Rather, HVCEO and its regular and contractual employees will retain a "planning only" role towards these issues. Part of this will be to recommend which entities should be responsible for maintenance of planned features.

As the River Trail develops and maintenance of more features is needed, the taking of responsibility will be requested of municipal recreation and/or public works departments, as this is their area of government service.

The guiding principle will be that property owners, public or private, are responsible for the maintenance and liability insurance for any River Trail features on their properties. HVCEO will not own or lease any River Trail equipment, features, or property.

**3)** Another area of potential insurance risk concerns volunteers acting in the name of and under the sponsorship of an organization. As noted above, when volunteer clean ups or ramp construction events in the field were held by HVEDP before HVCEO involvement, they were provided one day insurance for all participants under the policy of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's King's Mark Resource Conservation and Development District.

HVCEO should continue to avoid direct management of and liability for volunteer activities as it has no resources to provide such insurance. And in conjunction with this, in all cases annual riverside or waterway clean up days must not be under the sponsorship or co-sponsorship of HVCEO.

For example Eastern Mountain Sports organized and sponsored a clean up of the Still River in Brookfield and Danbury on 5/21/05 and again on May 20, 2006. This company provided liability insurance for all workers at the events. HVCEO and its agents may participate in these events, but HVCEO should not be designated by them as a cooperating sponsor or insurer of participants. Future event sponsors may wish to make insurance arrangements with King's Mark.

**4)** While paddlers have had access to these waterways for decades, the River Trail planning process should be geared towards increases in paddler safety improvements.

For the first time, the Still River rapids near of Brookfield Four Corners have been identified as a hazard by a warning sign directed at paddlers. And at the Bleachery Dam, a wire barrier to prevent canoes, etc. from going over the dam was added due to heightened awareness from River Trail planning. If safety is a visible factor in River Trail planning, all parties can only benefit.

**5)** As for the design and installation of new put in or take out locations, King's Mark has the skills to design, obtain permits for and build riverside recreational enhancements. In each case it retains no maintenance or ownership responsibilities, which must be accepted by others for the project to be constructed.

To remain within its current insurance policy HVCEO will continue to rely upon King's Mark for leadership in the area of project development. If King's Mark were not available another entity will be found as HVCEO itself may not design or install River Trail features.

**6)** The term "Housatonic Valley River Trail" is both a geographic designation and a planning process. There is no separate entity with this name and "Housatonic Valley River Trail" does not by itself retain any insurance coverage.