

## South County Watersheds Greenspace Protection and Implementation Strategy



### BACKGROUND

Nearly 30 percent of the Pawcatuck Watershed's 264 river miles are impaired due to biodiversity impacts and excess metal concentrations. Non-point source pollution is the greatest cause of these water quality problems. To protect and manage existing contiguous forestland and promote good water quality, a coalition of town and planning councils seeks to develop a watershed plan for the Pawcatuck Watershed. Nine towns within the watershed have similar natural and cultural resources that risk being irreversibly altered due to enormous pressure for growth. The Plan will give watershed communities a competitive edge in obtaining Federal and State land acquisition funds.

### LOCATION

The Pawcatuck River Watershed covers a land area of approximately 300 square miles in southwestern Rhode Island and southwestern Connecticut. It encompasses four major watersheds: Narrow River, Pawcatuck River,

Saugatucket River and the south shore, and the Green Hill and Ninigret Salt Ponds. This region of Rhode Island is commonly referred to as 'South County', for its unique rural and coastal character. South County makes up most of southern Rhode Island.

The Pawcatuck Watershed also contains seven major rivers and their tributaries including Chipuxet, Chickasheen, Wood, Queen, and Pawcatuck Rivers of Rhode Island, and the Shunock and Green Fall Rivers of Connecticut. These rivers drain the Pawcatuck Basin into the Little Narragansett Bay Estuary. A population of 60,000 people relies on groundwater for domestic uses.

### ISSUES BEING ADDRESSED

Approximately 65 percent of the Pawcatuck's land area remains undeveloped. It is predominantly prime farmland, unfragmented forests, forested wetlands, bogs and fens, and boasts a wide range of natural habitats for many unique plant and animal communities. Seventy percent of Rhode Island's globally rare and 63 percent of its state rare species are found within the Pawcatuck Watershed.

- Urbanization threatens water quality, critical habitats, drinking water supplies, and the character and quality of the landscape. Growth will continue, but local communities need a greater ability to plan on a landscape or watershed scale to protect future resources.
- Non-point source pollution and the fragmentation of riparian habitats are the largest threats to the waterbodies. Agricultural and surface run-off have led to high levels of metals and pathogens in various stretches of the Narrow, Saugatucket, and Pawcatuck Rivers, and the Green Hill and Ninigret Salt Ponds.
- Biodiversity is being negatively impacted along several river stretches.
- The conversion of rural land uses to suburban and urban development continues to be a major management issue in the area. The watershed is located on the edge of expanding urban development coming from the Providence Metropolitan area.



Since 1999, the Northeastern Area and the Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters have sponsored a cooperative challenge grants program to promote watershed health and restoration through the conservation, restoration, and sound stewardship of trees and forests.

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## GOALS

- Improve the ability of state and watershed communities to address the need to protect and preserve surface and groundwater quality and aquatic habitat, while accommodating new growth.
- Maintain the integrity of high-quality surface and groundwater, and help restore impaired waters.
- Promote joint planning and project management among local land trusts, and build watershed partnerships.
- Dovetail with existing regional efforts, such as the South County Technical Planning Assistance Program, to bring a new perspective to water quality and land use management decisions.
- Promote the use of forests and forest stewardship through greenspace planning.
- Coordinate and assist with the implementation of a watershed greenspace plan.

## METHODOLOGY

This project offered community assistance to inventory natural and cultural features in order to protect community character and watershed health. GIS-derived maps and underlying data will become part of comprehensive land use plans and a vehicle to guide growth and target parcels for future acquisition. This project links with other existing Federal, State, local, and private partnerships to:

- Bring together volunteers and local officials from nine towns to produce a *South County Watersheds Protection and Implementation Strategy*.
- Establish forested riparian greenbelts.
- Bring together community volunteers to identify and conserve important natural and cultural areas.
- Organize greenspace committees in each of the towns.
- Review local comprehensive plans for each town.
- Gather existing GIS data and watershed information.
- Expand GIS data with local input, fieldwork, and assistance from other land protection organizations.
- Organize local review and refinement of maps and regional protection strategy.
- Hold local and regional workshops to gather input from project participants.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The final product is a watershed-based protection strategy identifying features that towns find most important to protect. The strategy lists actions for local, State, and Federal organizations to take. Planning and implementation occurs on town-by-town basis to build consensus on community priorities. A regional planning council was formed to coordinate action. Communities will work together to achieve common goals. Other outcomes include:

- Publication of watershed greenspace maps, regional plan, and implementation of the strategy.
- Washington (South) County Land Trust Coalition.
- South County Greenspace Action Team.
- Use as a model for planning in other watersheds.

## PARTNERS

- Towns of Charlestown, Exeter, Hopkinton, Narragansett, North Kingstown, Richmond, South Kingstown, West Greenwich, and Westerly
- RIDEM Divisions: Forest Environment, Sustainable Watersheds, and Planning & Development
- University of Rhode Island Cooperative Extension
- US EPA
- Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association
- Saugatucket River Heritage Corridor and Salt Ponds Coalitions, and Narrow River Preservation Association
- RI Rural Land Coalition and RI Greenways Council
- Southern New England Forest Consortium
- The Nature Conservancy
- Washington County Regional Planning Council
- Washington County Land Trust Coalition

## FUTURE PLANS

- Adopt Greenspace Strategy into local comprehensive plans.
- Promote the use of the Greenspace Strategy in land trust decision-making through public outreach.
- Produce a South County Watershed Greenspace Implementation Strategy.

Towns continue to reach out to State and Federal partners for assistance as development pressure continues. In turn, State and Federal partners hope to work with local governments and watershed groups to achieve broader water quality and land management goals by providing tools they need to manage growth. Regional partnerships have proved to be a sounding board and driving force for landscape planning and regional decision-making. In the future, resources will be devoted to managing protected lands, restoring water quality, and redevelopment of urbanized areas.

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