

Forum looks at local effort to improve water quality

Water

By Derek Gomes

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NEWPORT - Officials from municipalities, state government and nonprofit organizations on Thursday night discussed the patchwork of initiatives they deploy to improve water quality that, in many cases, overlap.

How these activities blend together was the backdrop of “The Future of Clean Water: the Island Waters Forum,” as these community partners are poised to put to use nearly \$1 million in federal funding awarded by the Environmental Protection Agency.

“On Aquidneck Island, it's powerful to see the partnerships of the community and nonprofits,” Curt Spalding, the administrator for the EPA's New England region, told those gathered in the auditorium of the Community College of Rhode Island Newport campus. He later said that innovations typically occur among groups, as opposed to one person being struck by an idea.

Island Waters, the collaboration that applied for the federal grant, is comprised of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, the Aquidneck Land Trust, Clean Ocean Access, the three municipalities on Aquidneck Island and the state. Representatives from each, as well as the Eastern Rhode Island Conservation District, spoke about how their agency confronts clean-water issues and touched on how all the work is interconnected.

Gary Crosby, Portsmouth's planner, discussed how the town once wrestled with the prospect of installing sewers, but settled on establishing a wastewater management district that focuses on inspecting onsite wastewater treatment systems in Island Park and Portsmouth Park.

Tom O'Loughlin, Middletown's director of public works, touched on current discussions of implementing a stormwater utility district that would tax properties based on how much stormwater runoff they contribute.

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As Aquidneck Island's municipalities have sought to reduce water pollution, the state and nonprofits are testing phosphorus, nitrogen and bacteria levels in Newport County's nine reservoirs, which have all been declared impaired. High levels of nutrients in source waters translate to higher costs for Newport Water to treat it so it is safe to drink out of the tap, said Elizabeth Scott, the deputy chief of the state Department of Environmental Management's Office of Water Resources.

Many factors conspire to endanger water quality locally, such as the amount of development in watersheds, aging underground infrastructure, climate change and the shallowness of the reservoirs, said Julia Forgue, Newport's director of public utilities.

One method to combat water pollution is preserving open space, according to Chuck Allott, the executive director of the Aquidneck Land Trust. “By protecting these open spaces permanently,” he said, “we ensure that at least a certain percentage of these watersheds remain pervious surfaces.”

The grant was one of eight recently administered for watershed improvements along the Rhode Island and Massachusetts coasts, with infrastructure improvements in the works. Going forward, Island Waters is expected to implement between five and 20 best management practices to protect and improve watersheds.

With tourism and boating industries funneling hundreds of millions of dollars into Newport County's economy, there is an economic incentive for all stakeholders, said Thomas Ardito, the executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

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