

Improvements All Around: A roundup of environmental happenings from ecoRI News

Shellfishing in the Providence River? Sure!

Years of work and millions of dollars in investment are paying off for the Providence River, and with it, fishing and shellfishing opportunities have increased.

This spring, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) opened the lower third of the Providence River to quahogging on a conditional basis for the first time in more than 75 years. And experts say the river is clean enough to fish, too.

“This is a tremendous day for Rhode Island that many never thought possible,” DEM Director Janet Coit said in a statement. “The opening of these new shellfishing grounds is the result of water quality improvements from decades of intense efforts to clean up the Providence River and Narragansett Bay.”

The Biggest Project You’ll Never See

A June 18 groundbreaking ceremony hosted by the Narragansett Bay Commission (NBC) marked the opening of the final phase in the largest public works project ever undertaken in Rhode Island, and likely the project’s last public appearance for some time as the work to benefit the surface estuary heads underground.

The third stage of the combined sewer overflow (CSO) project, known as “RestoredWaters RI,” is expected to raise the water quality in Narragansett Bay and its watershed and subsequently improve health and environmental conditions.

NBC operates Rhode Island’s two largest wastewater treatment facilities, Fields Point in Providence and Bucklin Point in East Providence. The new CSO tunnel beginning in Pawtucket will run 2.2 miles and provide a 65-million-gallon capacity to contain water and wastewater resulting from foul weather overflows until the liquid can be processed.

The eventual completion of the phase-three tunnel will be followed by construction of a park to benefit residents of East Providence, Central Falls and Pawtucket with bike paths, estuary overlooks and recreational and educational areas.

Providence’s \$140M Facelift

The Imagine Downtown Providence project, headed by global design consultant Arup, brought forward a proposal to redesign Kennedy Plaza, Waterplace Park and the Riverwalk. From added lighting and bathrooms to new performance stages and water features, the proposal would reshape downtown from the ground up.

In development since last December, the project took into consideration thousands of survey responses and public comments to develop a full-scale reconfiguration of the space.

In one of the biggest changes, Washington Street would be closed off to traffic and incorporated into the expanded plaza, according to Alban Bassuet, associate principal with project lead Arup. This would create a larger space with more “opportunity for public engagement and to revitalize the area,” he said.

The Providence Rink would transition into a versatile multiuse area, with a paintable floor mural, skating obstacles, places to eat and drink and audio-visual installations ready for events of up to 2,000 people, according to Bassuet. A new rink, designed to imitate skating on a frozen river, would be built on top of the current Washington Street.

Throughout the changes, bus travel will remain the focal point of the Kennedy Plaza area, according to Bonnie Nickerson, director of Providence’s Department of Planning and Development.

However, Nickerson said the design team will remain in direct contact with the Rhode Island Department of Transportation and keep bus accessibility options scalable in light of another proposed breakup of the Kennedy Plaza central bus hub. The state’s Multi-Hub Bus System has faced public backlash because of its potential to lengthen transfer times and scatter bus access across downtown.

“One of the things that we tried to do with our plan ... is to identify spaces that could be scalable up for the level of bus activity that ultimately ends up in the greater [Kennedy Plaza] area,” Nickerson said.

Backyard Gardeners Work to Create an Interstate Pollinator ‘Highway’

Rhode Island gardeners in Cranston and Barrington are joining a national effort to install native plants in their gardens. The idea behind the effort is to link their yards with native habitat on protected lands and create what organizers are calling “pollinator pathways” to boost populations of bees, butterflies, birds and other wildlife.

In the Edgewood section of Cranston, Suzanne Borstein is leading the effort to get her neighbors and friends to plant native plants in what she calls the “tree lawn” — the area between the sidewalk and the road. Since last November, she has hosted a series of online meetings to discuss the initiative, and nearly three dozen Cranston households had agreed to participate by the beginning of May, with more signing on every week.

“The connectability of the garden spaces is what’s especially important,” Borstein said. “If you have a great yard but nobody else in the neighborhood does, then the pollinators won’t be attracted or sustained.”

Planting native plants and restoring native habitat is vital to preserving biodiversity, according to the National Audubon Society. The habitat created by native plant gardens helps to nurture and sustain insects, birds and other creatures. The Rhode Island Wild Plant Society has many resources for adding native plants to your garden.

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