

The One Thing We All Share: ecoRI News

October roundup

Shell Game

A local landmark climate lawsuit against a fossil-fuel behemoth has been given approval to proceed.

U.S. District Court Judge William E. Smith recently denied a request for dismissal by Shell Oil Products U.S. in a case brought by the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF).

The Boston-based environmental advocacy group alleges Shell failed to safeguard Providence and Narragansett Bay from flooding and other climate-crisis threats at its petroleum storage terminal on Providence Harbor.

The 75-acre property and ethanol railcar terminal on Allens Avenue with 25 petroleum storage tanks sits in a flood zone and discharges petroleum and toxic chemicals into the Providence River via stormwater runoff.

CLF accuses Shell of violating the federal Clean Water Act and the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act by withholding information about pollutants the oil storage terminal releases.

The Rhode Island case will now proceed to the discovery phase of the trial, a step that no other climate-crisis case against a fossil-fuel company has achieved.

Downtown Drive-Thru Disrupts Bike Plans

Old-school, car-focused retail is clashing with new-age transit and a 21st-century economy at a proposed development along the Woonasquatucket River in Providence.

A 3.8-acre lot at the corner of Kinsley Avenue and Dean Street is the site of a proposed 5-story self-storage building, a Wendy's restaurant with drive-thru and an eight-pump gas station coupled with a large convenience store. The self-storage facility would have 805 units along with 89 parking spaces.

This project is smack in the middle of a neighborhood revitalization effort to open up river habitat and advance bicycle- and pedestrian-focused infrastructure. It's all part of a larger citywide initiative to reduce traffic and encourage walking between neighborhoods such as Federal Hill and Smith Hill.

Plans are advancing to connect downtown with the Smith Hill, Valley and Olneyville neighborhoods. The plans are key pieces of Mayor Jorge Elorza's Great Streets Initiative and Urban Trail Network and the long-established Woonasquatucket River Greenway Improvement Project.

The proposed project conflicts with plans to change the section of Kinsley Avenue to a one-way street and make room for a two-way bike lane, as proposed by city redevelopment plans.

Instead of denying the project, the City Plan Commission agreed to give the project developer time to answer criticisms of the proposal. The application hearing was continued until November 17.

The Rats Were Always There

During the height of the pandemic, people in Greater Providence reported seeing rats in large numbers, even in broad daylight.

"Our city, like many cities across the country, has seen an increase in rodents amidst the pandemic," said Emily Koo, sustainability strategy manager for the city of Providence.

But the truth is, the rats were always there; we just didn't notice them.

"One reason a lot of people are seeing rats more is because we're home more now," said Tony DeJesus, technical director for Providence-based Big Blue Bug Solutions.

"The pandemic has caused disruptions to rat populations on a global scale," noted rodentologist Robert "Bobby" Corrigan said. "I hear from every city that we see rats during the day, we see them in areas we never used to see them. And it all makes sense. These rat populations depend on us."

When restaurants shuttered during the height of the pandemic, rats were stripped of a major food

source, forcing them to adjust their feeding times to see if they would have better luck at different times of the day.

Hence the idea that there are more rats than ever when, in fact, they're just another animal trying to survive a challenging time by adapting their lifestyle.

(Water)body Issues

Rhode Island has 890 waterbodies that state agencies and their partners monitor for quality. Of these, 39% are stressed by pollution and unwanted guests.

The federal Clean Water Act requires states to assess the overall quality of waters in their state. Historically, the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management has summarized the overall water quality of the state in a biennial (every even year) report titled "State of the State's Waters."

Among the new waters added to the 2018-2020 impaired list are Buckeye Brook, the tributaries to Warwick Pond, and the nine reservoirs that make up the Newport Water System: North and South Easton ponds, Gardiner Pond, Paradise Pond, Sisson Pond, Lawton Valley Reservoir, Nonquit Pond, Watson Reservoir and Sisson Pond.

The Newport Water System has been under stress for the past several years. The water coming out of customers' taps is safe to drink.

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