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Housatonic Valley Association inaugurates new office

By: Jennifer Barry , Staff Reporter

WASSAIC - To coincide with the weekend Wassaic Project (see story, Page A5), the Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) officially opened and inaugurated its new office in the Hamlet of Wassaic on Aug. 22.

Amenia Town Supervisor Wayne Euvrard led the ceremony and thanked all involved persons for their contributions to beautify Wassaic.

The HVA is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1941 that aims to conserve and protect the environment in the Housatonic River Watershed.

The mission of the HVA is to protect the rural character and natural health of the local communities by working with community leaders, farmers, area residents and developers in order to encourage environmentally healthy growth.

As the local communities grow, part of the HVA's mission is to take the steps needed to ensure that clean drinking water and a healthy environment that can be enjoyed by the local community for generations to come.

With their New York Office in Wassaic now fully operational, the HVA can focus on the ecological health of the Ten Mile River and its watershed, as well as weigh in on several of the major development projects coming into the watershed area.

The building that houses the HVA was donated by HVA board member Anthony Zunino, who has currently been at work restoring both the Maxon Mills building and the Luther Barn auction house.

"We are centrally located between all the towns and can bring together environmental resources, volunteers, officials and other regional groups to confer about watershed projects and regional planning," said Tonia Shoumatoff, the HVA's watershed manager for the Ten Mile River. "We recently hosted the Dutchess County Planning Board here and we have just been hired by the Town of Amenia to implement a grant from the Hudson Greenway."

Shoumatoff herself penned the original grant proposals for the Harlem Valley Rail Trail extension into Wassaic five years ago when she was the chair of the Amenia Conservation Advisory Council.

Initially, the grant was sought through the Recreation Trails Program, but the money went to a project in Fishkill instead.

Despite the roadblock, there was still interest in the rail trail project and the Town of Amenia worked to receive the Greenway grant to do the initial surveys for the extension.

Shoumatoff and the HVA will now do the preliminary work to bring the Harlem Valley Rail Trail down into Wassaic which, according to Shoumatoff, will open up the possibility of continuing a Greenway all the way down the Ten Mile River.

"The HVA Ten Mile River program in New York has provided the only voice for the Ten Mile River watershed in the region for the last five years," she said. "We are now preparing to conduct our largest assessment ever: an inventory of the base quality of the Great Swamp River, which we will be doing with a group called Tetrattech. We also make written and oral comments during the SEQRA (State Environmental Quality Review Act) process on all development applications in the region."

According to the HVA's 2006 shoreline survey, the Ten Mile River is a near-pristine system.

With its source in New York and it feeding into the Housatonic in Connecticut, Shoumatoff described the Ten Mile River as an orphan watershed.

"With neither New York or Connecticut at the helm to monitor this watershed, we (the HVA) felt a need to step in and keep an eye on the health of this ecosystem," she said.

According to Shoumatoff, the area is now at a critical point as interest in tourism and real estate development increases in the area.

"In order to ensure that we continue to have a clean environment in this region over the next 10 years of growth, we are all going to need to work together and do a regional plan for the watershed," she said. "Many good recommendations were made by the Harlem Valley aquifer study, but few of them have been implemented. We want to bring those recommendations to the attention of our municipal, county and state leaders."

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Several elected officials and state leaders were in attendance to offer their congratulatory remarks and to support the HVA's conservation efforts.

State Assemblyman Marc Molinaro (R-Tivoli) and Sen. Vincent Leibell (R,C, I-Patterson) were also on hand for a ribbon-cutting to commemorate the new "pocket park" across from Maxon Mills.

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The image shows three vehicles parked side-by-side on a white reflective surface. From left to right: a bright yellow sedan, a red SUV with a spare tire mounted on the back, and a dark blue sedan.

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