The Riverfront Development Plan
A New Vision for Pawtucket

1997
The Blackstone Valley has a rich and colorful history. And a river runs through it.

The Blackstone River, its deep and rocky expanse stretching 46 miles from Worcester, MA, through the Pawtucket area and eventually as the Pawtucket River to Narragansett Bay, has been the catalyst for centuries of change and growth.

And as the 20th century surges quickly toward a new millennium, the Blackstone takes on new importance. Eyes that once scorned the river as a murky, polluted anachronism are viewing it in a new light.

The great mills that ignited the American Industrial Revolution and the steamboats that churned the waters are gone. But a new and exciting future is at hand - one that promises green walkways connecting historic sites, renewed landscaping, more public access and open space parks, additional and improved boat landings and a floating “classroom” to teach the next generation about the river that was old when the first Native Americans stared at the gushing waters hundreds of years ago.

Few entities have provided what the Blackstone has given us and our ancestors: jobs, recreation, food and drinking water, transportation - and power.

Carved 12,000 years ago by a melting glacier as it gouged its way to the sea, the Blackstone River was perfect in many ways. Narrow and deep, with tremendous drops in elevation, it provided fast-moving water that turned the wheels of industrial mills that flourished in communities all along its bank. Beautiful scenery encouraged walkers and bird-watchers. And the bounty of fish - shad, salmon and bass among them - was obvious.

Civilized man harnessed the boon of the Blackstone. The roaring torrents turned the wheel at Samuel Slater's Mill in Pawtucket. And that achievement, more than any other, kicked off the Industrial Revolution in America.

But progress came with a cost. Increased development along the river put industrialists at odds with fishing interests. Tempers often flared, and there was even one full-fledged riot.

Mankind also dipped his hand into the river, and not always for the betterment of nature. Dams and bridge abutments hindered the migration of spawning fish, and species began to disappear.
Mills burgeoned along the river, so many, in fact, that the Blackstone was once known as “the Hardest Working River in America”. And that didn’t even count the many riverboats carrying travelers and cargo such as lumber, bricks and coal.

There was a time when rampant growth was encouraged without regard to the impact on the river. Over time, dyes and bleaches, heavy metals, chemicals and raw sewage dumped in threatened to kill the Blackstone.

As oil replaced coal as the main source of home heating fuel - and as the Providence & Worcester Railroad line up the Blackstone Canal replaced travel boats - the Blackstone’s future was as murky as the color of its water.

Environmental awareness has saved the Blackstone from oblivion. Volunteer groups have joined with private industry and governments to clean the river and its banks and to plan together for a new and improved Blackstone.

Tours on the new Blackstone Valley “Explorer” riverboat have taken people- particularly students - to parts of the river they have never seen before.

People, like wildlife, flowers and trees, are returning to the Blackstone. They want to save what is historic and build for the future. They encourage appropriate commercial development, re-use of vacant industrial buildings, creation of public gathering places and promotion of riverside gardens and public arts projects.

- Dale M. King
  Pawtucket Times staff reporter
Mayor Robert Metivier established the Pawtucket Riverfront Commission in April 1994 and directed it to review the entire riverfront and make recommendations on its re-use.

The Commission spent the first few years dealing with specific sites on the river. In January or 1997, the commission undertook a directed public participation outreach effort to involve citizens in the evaluation and discussion of the existing riverfront and in developing this plan for the re-use of the city’s riverfront.

The commission members represent public agencies, local businesses and interested citizens.

Michael Cassidy, chairman
Robert Billington, vice chairman
  Donald Baker
  Paul Bettencourt
  Suzanne Buchanan
  Terry Condon
  Rachel Couture
  William Hunt
  Robert Machowski
  Kenneth McGill
  Janice McHale
  Morris Nathanson
  William Noonan
  Kevin Shea
  Albert Smallwood
  Andrew Spingarn
  Polly Stiles
RECOMMENDATIONS

PUBLIC ACCESS

Provide both physical and visual access to the river.

- Develop a linear greenway along the entire riverfront
- Remove the obsolete storage tanks on the riverfront
- Complete the walkway connector between Slater Mill and the Pawtucket Veterans Memorial
- Restore the historic landscape on the river at William E. Tollman High School, restoring the existing public access
- Expand the visual access by removing overgrowth along the riverbanks
- Encourage the restoration and clean up of public-utility-owned property along the river
RECREATION

Increase and improve recreational opportunities.

- Develop public open space/parks at State Pier area, Taft Street area, Roosevelt Avenue Bridge and other appropriate locations along the riverfront
- Improve/create boat landings along the entire riverfront
- Encourage the development of marinas where appropriate south of Division Street Bridge
- Support the Army Corps of Engineers and the Blackstone River National Heritage Corridor effort to establish fish ladders at dams
- Encourage President Clinton to declare the Blackstone a “National Historic River”
CONNECTIONS

Provide connections between resources along the river in Pawtucket and to other communities and resources in the Blackstone Valley.

- Expand water transportation facilities between Pawtucket and other Rhode Island destinations
- Convince DOT and DEM to change the proposed route of the Blackstone River Bikeway from Roosevelt Avenue
- Link new public access to downtown Pawtucket area and Slater Mill
- Encourage the Army Corps of Engineers to dredge the channel from Providence Harbor to the Main Street Bridge
COMMUNITY ENRICHMENT

Encourage projects along the river that bring the community together, uplift civic pride and provide cultural experiences.

- Create public places along the riverfront for people to gather and enjoy activities
- Enhance the aesthetics of the historic bridges on the river by lighting their architectural details
- Promote the development of riverside gardens and public art projects
- Encourage aesthetics in new projects along the river that retain local historic character and reveal natural assets

EDUCATION

Reveal the natural and cultural resources of the river that can enrich educational experiences.

- Develop outdoor classrooms along the river that enrich environmental education and local history programs
- Provide interpretive areas and signage along the riverfront where appropriate
MULTIPLE USES

Encourage compatible multiple uses along the river that will create a distinctive and vibrant waterfront.

- Encourage commercial development that will offer public access and views of the river, where appropriate
- Re-use vacant industrial buildings on the riverfront for non-industrial uses
- Work with private property owners to increase opportunities for public access along the riverfront
- Stimulate business activity that encourages public use of the waterfront and river
- Evaluate expanding the existing Riverfront Development District Zoning