



Great Barrington River Walk given national recognition

By Scott Stafford

Berkshire Eagle Staff

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GREAT BARRINGTON — A half-mile river walk, built from what was once a mound of debris by community volunteers over a period of 21 years, has been recognized by the U.S. Department of the Interior as a National Recreation Trail, one of 1,000 trails in America's National Trail System.

During a special trail dedication at 10:30 a.m., on Saturday, June 13, at the Housatonic River Walk's W. E. B. Du Bois River Garden Park at Church and River streets, U.S. Rep. John W. Olver is expected to award the certificate of designation.

"From coast to coast, the National Trails System helps connect American families with the wonders of the outdoors," said Ken Salazar, U.S. Secretary of the Interior. "These new National Recreation Trails, built through partnerships with local communities and stakeholders, will create new opportunities for fitness and stewardship, while creating a lasting legacy for our children and grandchildren."

"I am very pleased that the Housatonic River Walk has received this designation," Olver said. "As someone who has volunteered on the trail and walked the trail, I can say with certainty that it is a community treasure that well deserves this national recognition. It connects us to the land, the river, and each other."

According to Rachel Fletcher, founding director of the Housatonic River Walk, in 1988, a dozen local volunteers started cleaning up the wreckage of decades of neglect, litter and dumping of debris. That debris included an old burned-out drug store that had been scraped off its foundation and pushed into the river bank.

It took them three years to prepare the first 139 feet of trail. Since then, more than 2,000 volunteers have removed about 400 tons of rubble and debris from a half-mile of river bank, an ecological restoration of native vegetation, and the construction of a soft-surface walking trail with historical elements related to William Stanley and W. E. B. DuBois.

"When we started it was the worst, most devastated riverbank in South County," Fletcher said. "So we're very excited about the river walk designation."

She added that the designation could lead to state and federal funding and technical assistance to help with trail maintenance and enhancement.

"And more people will know about it, which is what we're banking on so that people will not only know it as a river walk, but as a model for other efforts," she said.

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