

The Item reprinted in Worcester Telegram

# Nashua River study heading to Bolton, Lancaster town meetings



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A standup paddle boat navigates the Nashua River. [File Photo/Lynne Klaff]

**By Sara Arnold ITEM CORRESPONDENT**

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The Nashua River has been a part of the culture, character and history of the area for hundreds of years, from the Native Americans to the current day. Now, there is an effort to preserve and protect the Nashua River, in Bolton and Lancaster, as well as some other

area towns, for future generations to enjoy via the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Voters in Bolton and Lancaster will be asked to weigh in - on a move that could give it federal designation - at the May annual town meetings.

The National Wild and Scenic Rivers System was created by Congress in 1968 to encourage river management and promote public participation in river protection by designating and preserving certain free-flowing rivers that have specific benefits such as natural and historical value.

“Designation would help safeguard the special character of this river and encourage river stewardship that crosses town boundaries,” said Al Futterman, land programs director at the Nashua River Watershed Association.

For the last three years, the Nashua River Wild and Scenic River Study Committee has met to build the case for Wild and Scenic River designation. The group has determined eligibility, looked at sustainability, identified issues and threats, gathered community input, evaluated existing protection and prepared a stewardship plan.

A river or river segment must be free flowing, without dams, and have at least one “outstandingly remarkable” natural, cultural or recreational resource in three main categories: Biological diversity; recreational and scenic; and historical and cultural.

Nashua River has many of those, Futterman said.

“The study area has exceptional biological diversity; three state-designated Areas of Environmental Concern, six ‘Priority Natural Communities’ along the Nashua River and significant areas designated as ‘core habitat’ by Massachusetts,” Futterman said.

These include the core habitat of pitch pine–scrub oak (Lancaster) and high-terrace floodplain forest (Bolton and Lancaster), as well habitats of endangered animals, including “a notably large population of Blanding’s turtles,” according to Futterman. Communities around the Nashua River are also a corridor for wildlife migration.

“The study area has given rise to many influential conservationists,” he added. “The area experienced a breathtaking insurgence of conservation activities in the 1960s that had lasting impact on the cultural fabric of the region. The Marion Stoddart story and the clean-up of the Nashua River has merited international acclaim and has been a model

for watershed groups across the country. Noteworthy historic sites, including those associated with Native Americans, Shakers and transcendentalists, abound in our area.”

The study and designation would only impact federally funded activity and not change ownership or use.

The work to make this happen is a local, state and federal effort.

“All 11 communities were determined to be supportive hosts to the designation should it come to pass,” Futterman said.

The communities involved have a lot of say. There are representatives from Bolton and Lancaster on the Study Committee. The Nashua River Watershed Association, along with the study committee’s town representatives, have met with each town’s Board of Selectmen, Planning Board and Conservation Commission, as well as Water Department and/or Public Works.

### **Bolton and Lancaster**

In Bolton, the Nashua River runs through the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management area. Rebecca Longvall, Bolton’s conservation agent and one of the town’s representatives on the Study Committee, said, “It points out a valuable resource in town.” She said the plan “aligns” with Bolton’s Open Space and Recreation Plan (OSRP).

Longvall said it has the support of the Conservation Commission, which will be its authorizing party for the article on the town meeting.

“Lancaster has had a long and historic relationship with the Nashua River. The river is an essential part of the historic, social, and cultural fabric of the community,” said Bill Flynn, a Lancaster representative on the Study Committee. “The Lancaster Conservation Commission and Planning Board have done an outstanding job protecting the river as a community asset. I expect the town meeting will continue the Lancaster tradition of protecting this natural resource.”

The other Lancaster representative on the Study Committee, Susan Munyon, agreed.

“Founded 365 years ago, Lancaster has such a rich resource in the Nashua River,” Munyon said. “The community even then saw how valuable and beautiful the river was. Cleaning it up further and preserving it for future generations should be a priority.”

A community information forum on the stewardship plan will be held at the Thayer Memorial Library, in Lancaster, on Wednesday, April 25, at 7 p.m.

“Should any town vote not to seek designation, we will consult with National Park Service and our Congressional sponsor regarding how to proceed,” Futterman said. “The National Park Service is a crucial member of the Study Committee and has provided a structure for our work these past several years, as well as much appreciated expertise. Additionally, the Parks Service has, in part, funded the work of the Study Committee.” If the designation occurs, there is “annual federal (Parks Service) funds,” he said.

If all the participating towns approve the designation, Congress would have to approve legislation.

If Wild and Scenic status is obtained, additional funds are likely to be available, Futterman said. Since the Stewardship Plan is a voluntary plan, it can be implemented even if designation is not achieved.

“The Stewardship Committee will continue to function prior to designation, and it could also continue in its role as implementer of the plan if designation is not achieved, although in that instance there would not be federal funds,” Futterman said. If designation is achieved, a Stewardship Council with the 11 towns participating would oversee the river management plan’s implementation via the voluntary measures suggested for each town.

### **Clinton not included**

The Nashua River would be protected only from the fork, and leaves out the portion of the river in Clinton.

“Decisions regarding the geographic extent of the proposed designation was driven by the twin mandates of eligibility and suitability,” Futterman said. “The South Branch of the Nashua River in Clinton originates at the Wachusett Reservoir dam, and the case for eligibility was not as clear or strong as it was from the meeting of the waters downstream.”

Clinton, and other parts of the river, could in theory be added in the future, he said.