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EDITORIAL

Local rivers deserve federal recognition

Recognized locally for their efforts in restoring sections of the Nashua, Squannacook, and Nissitissit rivers to their previously pristine condition, nine Massachusetts and two New Hampshire communities are in contention to receive federal recognition and funds to continue their work.

That would happen if Town Meetings in Ayer, Bolton, Dunstable, Groton, Harvard, Lancaster, Pepperell, Shirley, and Townsend vote to seek the designation as "Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers." It covers segments of the Nashua River from Lancaster to the N.H. border and its two main tributaries, the Nissitissit and Squannacook.

These nine communities have been participating with the N.H. towns of Hollis and Brookline as part of a Nashua River Wild and Scenic River Study Committee to explore that eventuality by developing a voluntary Stewardship Plan.

Earning this federal designation would offer a truly win-win situation — federal recognition and funding with no strings attached.

Under the designation, a locally appointed Stewardship Council would be eligible to receive annual federal funding and technical assistance to implement the voluntary River Stewardship Plan. The three rivers then would be protected from adverse federal projects, including new dams.

There's no cost to participating communities. There's no federal taking of land and no impact on hunting and fishing. The designation does not stop local development, nor does it impact local zoning and property rights; it also doesn't require landowners to provide access to their property.

Only a select few waterways — one-quarter of one percent in the United States — have measured up to this lofty standard, established by Congress 50 years ago with the passage of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Only rivers with "outstandingly remarkable resource values" — including biological diversity, recreational and scenic qualities, and historical and cultural attributes — can be considered for this designation.

We believe the Nashua River Watershed and the association that bears its name has a legitimate chance to earn this rare federal award. It's a credit to the pioneering efforts of Marion Stoddart, current Nashua River Watershed Executive Director Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, plus other environmental activists and volunteers over the years that qualify the Nashua River and its tributaries for this unique recognition. Since arriving in Groton in the early 1960s, Stoddart, who'll be 90 this spring, has championed the campaign to improve the Nashua River and watershed, which encompasses 538 square miles in North Central Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire.

If approved at the town meetings, Congress must pass legislation awarding the designation.

We urge the nine Massachusetts towns to accept the voluntary Stewardship Plan and its recommendation to seek the Wild and Scenic designation.

Residents can learn more about the Wild and Scenic project at www.WildandScenicNashuaRivers.org.