

Shadow/Internship Day – The Winooski Valley Park District
PA 395 – Non-profits and the Environment
By Trevor M. Lashua

1972. That is the year listed as the official year of birth for the Winooski Valley Park District (WVPD). The idea for such an organization had its origins earlier than 1972, when residents in towns within the Winooski River valley were asked to take an informal opinion poll. A majority of those residents polled indicated that they strongly supported the idea of a Winooski River park. That park, the poll results suggested, should be one which primarily functions as a bird and wildlife sanctuary. The polls suggested that people also wanted the park to be a more than just a sanctuary or preserve, with room set aside for boat/canoe access and an all-season trail system.

The results were left with the five communities that participated in the original poll and in 1972, Burlington, Essex, South Burlington, Colchester, and Winooski decided to turn the idea of a river valley park into a reality. Since the WVPD would be quasi-governmental – receiving a large portion of its funding from the municipalities – the Vermont Legislature had to weigh in on the issue. That same year they passed a special statute, and WVPD was born.

Nearly two decades later, in 1988, Jericho and Williston decided to join in the district, which was now receiving money from a wide variety of grants, and even some individual citizen contributions in addition to the contributions of the seven communities. The expansion in its membership base coincided with an expansion of vision and purpose, as the WVPD expanded its previously stated conservation, environmental protection, and recreational mission.

Issues such as water quality, floodplain and wetland preservation, maintaining minimum stream flow from dams, and even aesthetic value/quality were added to the agenda. The WVPD began acquiring land along the river and in its watershed, and now watches over 1,700 acres of land and 12-miles of shoreline, expanding from the Winooski River to the shores of Lake Champlain and Colchester Pond as well. The district has also stated its intent to try and expand itself down the river valley, and even extend itself as far south as Montpelier.

A day out in the field with the WVPD reflects that vision, mission and purpose.

Shadow Day

Maggie Phelan is a twenty-something from Ft. Collins, Colorado, who ended up in Vermont after becoming an Ameri-Corps volunteer. I was supposed to be here 15 minutes ago, but if you're not familiar with Colchester, Delta Park can be a difficult place to find. At the end of a road, just beyond a state river access point there is a small cul-de-sac with a handful of parking spaces. The view opens up to the lake on the right, with the Adirondacks filling the distance with their quiet grace. Maggie is sitting on the ground with a few pieces of pre-cut wire mesh, steel ties, and a pair of needle nose pliers. She has already put together two of the pieces to make a cylinder, and is cutting another piece.

She gets up to shake my hand, offer a brief introduction, and then she sits back down. I join her on the ground, and she begins to explain what the heck it is she's doing with the wire mesh.

It's a nest guard, she explains. Turtles, in this case box turtles, painted turtles, and those nasty old snapping turtles lay their eggs on the sandy strip that runs along the beside where the river and lake collide. Once they've been laid, the turtles will bury and then camouflage their eggs. With the amount of human traffic – on foot, in a boat, or otherwise – the turtles are often easily spooked and leave the nest before it is camouflaged or even buried well.

Unlike mammals or even birds, those eggs are now on their own, as are the hatchlings – if they get that far. The nest guard will, hopefully, protect the eggs from predators (birds, foxes, raccoons) and from the clumsy feet of man.

We work together, as much as any strangers can when one doesn't know what exactly he is trying to do, and manage to affix the third piece of wire mesh to the top of the cylinder. I pick the nest guard up, and we head off down the trail. A boardwalk is set up, so that we don't tramp through the wetland and do more damage than necessary. The mosquitoes are thick -- and menacingly persistent. I estimate that I dealt at least 120 deadly blows on the walk down to the river alone.

Maggie and I try to have a conversation about turtle habitat, but we both look like were experiencing severe muscle spasms instead. The bug spray is no match for the overwhelming force used by the mosquitoes, an insect application of the Powell Doctrine.

At the end of the boardwalk is the site of the state's \$3.5 million dollar bike bridge. The new route opened up by the bridge will obstruct views of and access to the lake from Delta Park, and cyclists will be posited deep in the residential neighborhoods of Mallets Bay, farther away from the target connection the bridge is supposed to connect

— Great analogy

with. It may also bring more human traffic through one of the few turtle nesting sites on the Vermont side of Lake Champlain.

At the end of the boardwalk, Maggie tells me we're looking for a stick she stabbed vertically into the soft sand. The river rolls quietly along on one side, and on the other is a swampy wetland area. A weaving, wide trail leading from the wetland to the river indicates that turtles have at least passed through this spot. Maggie runs her hands through the sand like a comb and finds a few shell fragments. There were turtle eggs here, however, something got to them. To top it all off, the turtle guard she placed a little ways away is missing as well. On the site where it used to rest is a circular indentation in the sand and a hypodermic needle that washed up from the lake. No sign of any remaining eggs.

We head back to the parking area, swatting madly at the air as we go. Walking past a terraced concrete abutment, Maggie stops and asks me to help her measure each section's width and height. Eventually, she says, a mural will be painted on the site. The bottom layer will be a beneath the water look at lake and river wildlife. The middle layer will be a beach. The top layer will be the sky, with birds soaring and butterflies fluttering about.

We leave Delta Park and make our way to Essex, plunging down a steep road that breaks off of Route 15. At the bottom of the hill is the Woodside Natural Area and a date with a search for invasive plant species.

Maggie and I walk the 1.4 mile loop, slowly, very slowly. We scan the sides of the trail, our heads whipping from side to side. I don't let her know, but I've already forgotten the pictures and names of the plants I'm supposed to be looking for. Maggie

can name the bounty of wildflowers without pausing for breath, but the ferns with their more subtle variations trip her up and force her to pull up a guidebook with a dry title such as, *The Ferns of Northern New England*. These types of things, she explains, are the kind of things she will do when she is taking out an educational group.

We complete the loop just before noon, and head to the Ethan Allen Homestead for lunch at the WVPD's headquarters. After lunch I meet up with Matt, who serves as the Park Manager, project specialist, and a trails expert. Matt, who recently moved to South Hero from the San Francisco area with his fiancé (she's from Fairfax), is the new guy at the WVPD.

Two representatives of the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps show up at the Homestead to meet up with us. We head off to take a look at the sites of projects Matt has planned for the summer projects the VYCC will do for them. A bridge spanning a small brook will be replaced on a trail in Winooski, boundary-marking cedar posts will be buried along the border of a property in Burlington, and extensive trail work will be done at a newer piece of property in Williston that was ravaged by a snowmobile group and its plow-type machine. The WVPD relies on the VYCC for this type of labor every year, and even arranges for them to keep their van and equipment at the Homestead all summer long.

After that, I get a sneak preview of the bird-banding process that will take place the next day at Delta Park. Maggie explains the process: catching the birds with fine, thin nets, placing them in a small section of what looks like panty-hose, clipping the numbered band on their legs, and then releasing the birds. She expresses her doubts about the effectiveness of such exercises as we walk to the parking lot and say goodbye.

The Money Issue

The WVPD operates on a fiscal year that begins on July 1st and ends on June 30th. For the 2002 fiscal year, the district's expense side of its budget was listed as \$233,600, while it projected \$306,400 in operating and project/grant revenues. The seven member communities kicked in a grand total of \$217,500 (70 percent of its total revenue). Grant money, rental money, miscellaneous member related dues, and sales of the district's canoe guide made up the majority of the remaining revenue.

While a large portion of the district's funding comes from its municipal members, the organization maintains its 501-c3 status, so that donations are tax deductible.

Organizational Structure

The ultimate governance arm of the district is its Board of Trustees, which is a four-person board that is generally, but not always, appointed by the leaders of the individual member communities. The board has a traditional structure, electing a president, vice-president, treasurer, and a secretary.

The Board of Trustees meets at least once each month, and the agenda for that meeting is usually set by the Executive Director of the WVPD. The Executive Director has up to four full-time employees in his/her charge: the Park Manager, Natural Resource Specialist, Office Manager, and the Trails Expert. Sometimes individuals perform overlapping functions, such as an employee serving as the Park Manager and the Trails Expert, for example.

The Board of Trustees signs off on most decisions or projects, leaving the majority of the daily-type tasks up to the discretion of the staff to complete.

The second Tuesday of May is set aside for the WVPD's annual meeting.

A mission statement, drafted by the staff and approved by the Board of Trustees reads as follows:

"The mission of the Winooski Valley Park District shall be the planning, acquisition, and management of lands and waters within the boundaries of its member municipalities in the Winooski River Valley for purposes of conservation, preservation of natural areas, establishment of parks, and passive recreation.

Goals

- To plan for and conserve natural resources of regional significance through cooperative efforts with the State, member communities, the regional planning commission, and other local and regional organizations;
- To inventory and protect important natural areas and provide appropriate public access to those areas;
- To establish public parks that provide access to natural environments close to where people live and work. Parks will be designed and maintained to complement the natural features of the site; and
- To act as a catalyst organization for educational and outreach programs which further the mission of the Park District."

What Works ... And What Does Not

By being quasi-governmental *and* a not-for-profit organization that acts within a smaller area that is competition free, the WVPD has the luxury of having its funding be (more or less) as stable as it is. They can, roughly speaking, plan on the same amount of money every year, whereas an organization more dependent on member fees than anything else is subject to the whims of individuals and the prevailing winds of the economy.

By not quite being a government entity, it can't fully reap the benefits that come with being a state or municipal organization. Its mission and its scope will always be limited by that association, confined to certain areas and unable to proceed with larger land transactions beyond its means. Therefore it takes an incrementalist approach to its acquisition policies, picking up what areas it can, when it can. The WVPD is a by-the-rules conservation and recreation organization, so therefore, the principles of direct action as a means of getting things done is not at all an option. However, the ability to operate within that same vacuum takes away a great deal of the pressure an organization such as the Sierra Club or Greenpeace feels to get results as quickly as needed.

With a message of wildlife preservation and land conservation, the educational opportunities WVPD offers are a nice compliment for promotion of that message. They have naturalists on-staff to lead groups of inquisitive folks throughout the parks, pointing out the interesting flowers and birds, all the while promoting the district's goals. A number of pamphlets are available at each park, detailing why turtle nesting habitat protection is so crucial or why they need for volunteers to help pull invasive plant species from the parks. This type of goal/objective promotion is limited, and for the most part,

may not bring awareness of such things to many people beyond the citizen base that already utilizes the parks.

Perhaps the thing that seems to work best for WVPD is its willingness to cooperate: with the state, with their member municipalities, with those owning property adjacent to theirs, with volunteer groups, with groups whose desired land use conflicts (snowmobile organizations), and with the public. The district extends the hand of cooperation a little farther, making sure that all parks are free, and that they are open year-round from dusk until dawn.