

Plotting a corrective course: Boat pulled from Passaic River



Photo courtesy Chris Brooks

The upended Riverwatch boat, before its removal from under the Belleville Bridge.

By Ron Leir

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BELLEVILLE –

For members of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission’s Passaic River Restoration Program, it was just another day in the water.

Or so they like to say. But, in fact, what happened this past Saturday, Feb. 16, was a bit removed from the ordinary flotsam and jetsam the crew tends to fish out of the polluted Passaic.

This time, they pulled a boat out of the river – the “biggest single piece removed from the river” since the PVSC has been doing extractions since 1998, according to River Restoration Program Manager Brian Davenport.

According to a Feb. 13 preview release by PVSC Executive Director Michael DeFrancisci, the commission was sending out its crew to engage in “the removal of a capsized vessel” that had been “abandoned” after it became wedged between the riverbank and the Rutgers St. Bridge in Belleville on Saturday, Feb. 9.

DeFrancisi's release identified the vessel as the Riverwatch, a 1968 31-foot former U.S. Coast Guard vessel formerly used in search and rescue missions but "most recently used as a research vessel for Montclair State University."

Davenport said the boat's former owner, Capt. Paul Lerin, "told us that boat was chartered by the university for a fish study, to drag nets to trap fish on the Passaic."





Photo courtesy Chris Brooks

From to.: PVSC excavator re-positions boat, crane begins to lift vessel, and deposits mangled remains into flatbed trailer under highway.

That's interesting since the state Department of Environmental Protection has banned commercial fishing on the Passaic and has advised the public to avoid eating any fish caught from the river, given the prevalence of toxins from industrial discharges of prior years.

In recent years, however, federal and state environmental agencies have been trying to clean up the river and have been successful, through litigation, in getting a group of private companies to begin dredging out dioxin and other contaminants from a stretch of the river in Newark.

At any rate, Davenport said Lerin told him that he was in his boat, traveling upriver, in late August 2011 when Hurricane Irene was forecast, and Lerin – reportedly unable to navigate a passage because of closed bridges – anchored the boat in the river and went ashore.

But as the storm hit the area, the vessel broke loose from its moorings near the old Golumb service station site in Kearny and drifted to the base of the bridge in Belleville, ending up upside down, Davenport said.

According to Davenport, Lerin ended up suing the county, claiming that in response to the forecasts for Irene, he'd called ahead asking the county to have the bridges opened but the county reportedly countered that no such request had been logged and the suit eventually ended up being dismissed by the courts.

Why did it take so long to remove the boat?

Davenport put the blame on government red tape, the litigation and weather.

Shortly after Irene, he said, the River Restoration crews were on the river doing regular inspections when they spotted the wreck and notified the Coast Guard and New Jersey State Police about a potential hazard to navigation. "After it was certified the boat wasn't leaking [engine] oil, they left it at that," he said, so that's when the PVSC figured it had to take the lead.

“Once we found out it was Lerin’s boat, Lerin told us it would take him a couple of months to get money to retrieve the boat.” In the meantime, the lawsuit was filed and while that was pending, “nobody wanted to touch [the boat],” said Davenport.

Finally, when it became clear nothing would be happening, “we took action,” Davenport said. But even then, he said, it took several months before his crew managed to get all the necessary clearances.

“At first,” he said, “DOT (state Department of Transportation) didn’t want to close the Rt. 21 (Belleville) exit (at the bridge). Then, they gave us the okay to remove it only during the evening or on a weekend. Well, nobody wanted to work at night so we agreed to do it on a weekend sometime after Jan. 1.”

Then, he said, Lerin had to be convinced “to legally relinquish ownership” of the vessel, as beyond repair, to the PVSC.

After a couple of false starts, when weather forced cancelation of the job, at long last the crew – with the assistance of a crane rented by the DOT – was ready to tackle the job on Feb. 16.

“Everything went according to plan,” Davenport said. “It was nothing out of the ordinary. The day before, to save time, we’d rigged the boat up with straps and cables.” (Its weight was guesstimated at about 15,000 pounds.) And, by 7 a.m. Saturday morning, the DOT had closed Exit 6 on the northbound side of Rt. 21. A boom was placed in the river to contain any oil that might still be in the boat. EMS and a rescue truck were on site, just in case there were any safety issues. “Thankfully, there weren’t,” Davenport added.

All was in readiness.

“We got our Caterpillar 314D excavator onto the site, hooked up to the boat and began pulling it to get it right side up and then up the hillside,” he said. Then, at the top of the hill, the DOT crane operator lifted what was left of the mangled boat over a guardrail onto a flatbed truck, strapped down and covered with tarpaulin, and, with the rescue truck as an escort, it was hauled away to the PVSC plant in Newark.

By about 1 p.m., the operation was over and the Rt. 21 exit was reopened to traffic, Davenport said.

On Tuesday, a River Restoration crew was scheduled to inspect the area at low tide to assess whether any oil or debris had appeared on the water.

What remains of the boat will be dismantled this week at the PVSC plant, Davenport said, and “anything recyclable, like any aluminum or steel, the engine block, exhaust system, radiator, wiring, fiberglass, will be removed for appropriate recycling.”