

THE OBSERVER ONLINE

39 SEELEY AVE. | KEARNY, NJ 07032 | (201) 991-1600 | Est. 1887

Thanks to Doyle, river cleanup rolls on for quarter century +

9 AUGUST 2017 / BY RON LEIR | OBSERVER CORRESPONDENT

KEARNY —

Years ago, Carol Jean Doyle was doing research in the Kearny Museum and happened to notice some old photos, likely from the 1800s of “women dressed in hoop skirts going in a boat for a ride on the Passaic.”

“They would have lunch and dancing on the river as the boat would go up and down the Passaic,” she said.

“I guess it’s hard to picture now but the Passaic in its heyday was a great recreational waterway. People would come in from New York by train into the Arlington section, get off at Elm St. and walk down to the river,” Doyle said.

In fact, she added, “There are people from Kearny now in their 80s who remember swimming in the river.”

Unfortunately, with the river having been a convenience repository of toxins dumped from the industries that formerly lined its shoreline, the once-pristine condition of the water turned foul.

“During the ‘30s and ‘40s, the river was a mess,” said Doyle, who has served as Third Ward council member for nearly two decades and, for even longer, has led an annual volunteer day-long effort to clean a portion of the Kearny riverbank.

On May 25, the Town of Kearny, in partnership with the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission(PVSC) River Restoration Program, received the Public Lands Cleanup award from the New Jersey Clean Communities Council, a statewide litter-abatement program that dispenses funds to government-sponsored cleanup programs.

Doyle, who has organized riverbank sweeps in Kearny for the past 27 years, concurrent with the Junior Women of Arlington spearheading town cleanups, credited the Farrell sisters – Joan and Ann – with enlisting her in the campaign to remove debris from the riverbank while Ella Filippone and the Passaic River Coalition were pressing for government intervention, starting back in the 1980s, to restore the Lower Passaic.

And now, after years of government lawsuits against corporate polluters, court actions and studies, remediation action is anticipated within a few years.

In March 2016, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency selected a final cleanup plan for the lower 8.3 miles of the Lower Passaic and in September 2016, the EPA signed a legal agreement with Occidental Chemical Corp. for that company to design the cleanup under EPA's oversight, according to EPA spokesman Elias Rodriguez.

“The design work is on schedule. The EPA expects the design to take approximately four years, after which the implementation of the cleanup can begin. EPA expects to begin settlement negotiations soon with potentially responsible parties, including Occidental Chemical Corp., for the funding and performance of that cleanup,” Rodriguez said.

On the local level, meanwhile, Doyle hopes that the annual cleanup will continue, with the PVSC supplying a dumpster, gloves and large trash bags; the Kearny DPW providing rakes and shovels; the Kearny Fire Department hosing down the boat ramp; Cali Carting hauling away the trash; and Kearny ShopRite donating free water and soda to the volunteers.

For the past 11 years, the PVSC has sent representatives to Kearny schools to teach kids about the importance of recycling and it seems to be working.

“Our first couple of years, we averaged two roll-off containers of trash,” Doyle recalled. “Now it’s maybe three quarters of a roll-off.”

Heartily agreeing with that assessment is Kearny’s Chris Brooks, an environmental activist who happens to work with the PVSC River Restoration program.

“Carol Jean’s work has had a gigantic impact on the river,” said Brooks, “because she’s teaching kids. I can remember years ago when she was working with the Brownies and my daughter Meredith, who was at Roosevelt School at the time, was with them when they cleaned up the Frank Vincent Marina.

“Carol Jean keeps that cleanup going every year and she gets a lot of volunteers – now it’s the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts that also help her,” Brooks said. “Carol puts her heart into it. ... We’re seeing less debris for sure.”

No question that education will help foster a cleaner river, said Doyle. “Kids learn they can’t dump bottles or milk cartons down the sewer – they get it. It’s made a huge difference, at least in terms of what we see on the surface of the water. And I’m happy about that because it’s future generations who will stand on their shoulders.”

At the same time, Doyle remains hopeful of one day seeing the fulfillment of one of the Passaic River Coalition’s goals – completion of a riverside recreational trail for bikers, hikers and joggers – that would stretch from Kearny to Rutherford.

To put things in perspective, Doyle noted it took Kearny eight years to acquire and clean up the former Mugullian Oil property on Passaic Ave. “to make the riverfront parkland contiguous.”

Additional sites like the former Skinner Bros. service station and the old Rapp’s boatyard are still potentially formidable acquisitions but, meanwhile, Doyle said the town continues to pursue state and federal grants to get to the end of the trail.
