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## River Of Debris



*George Krusznis and Frank D'Antonio remove driftwood, tires and other trash from the Passaic River near Kearny. The larger pieces of driftwood are cut up with chainsaws and stored in the underbelly of their 30-foot government skimmer.*

*Photo by Tony Attrino*

## River Skimmers Pave Way For Passaic Boaters

By TONY ATTRINO

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You might call them "streetsweepers" of the sea. But the men on blue metal boats describe themselves as weather beaten and proud; they're charged with the responsibility of clearing the Passaic River of debris, paving the way of safety for other boaters.

Skimmer operators working for the Passaic Valley Sewage Commissioners motor along the Passaic River and have scooped up nearly 200 tons of waste since 1999. Their part of the river's restoration project, which began with volunteers several years ago, has bloomed into a full-time, year-round operation.

Old tires, bottles, beer cans, tennis balls, shoes, bicycle helmets, branches, and even bags of dog excrement are adrift in the water, posing hazards to pleasure boaters and rowing associations who complain about damage to their vessels caused by debris. Often, fallen trees and branches left-over from storms collect under drawbridges, creating traffic problems among boaters.

The debris is especially hazardous when it collects around the Route 7 bridge, which connects

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# Skimmers

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Kearny with North Arlington and Belleville.

The trash is trapped in the underbelly and rear of two 30- and 50-foot government boats purchased with public grants and tax dollars. The boats weigh about 28,000 pounds each, and chug along at 7 knots for six hours each day between high tides. The skimmers' motors, drivers and conveyor belts compress and store trash in the underbelly and rear of the well-oiled vessels, which are powered by diesel engines, hydraulics and run on biodegradable oil.

"The smell is really not too bad, depending on what you pick up," equipment operator George Krusznis of Belleville, said of the polluted river. Krusznis transferred last April from his job as a plant mechanic to work on the river. He said crews have picked up litter as small as Christmas cards and once caught a 70-foot long piece of driftwood.

"It took two backhoes to lift that out of the water," recalled Krusznis.

Krusznis and his partner, Frank D'Antonio, take turns piloting the boat inside an air-conditioned cab furnished with

several joysticks that move two huge crab-like claws at the front of the ship and capture trash.

Dead animals remain in the water, where they are devoured by crabs and other sea life.

"This job is stop, pickup; stop, pickup," D'Antonio said. The two travel from a dock on Newark Bay and patrol the water during the six hours between tidal changes.

The driftwood is cut up with chainsaws and all of the debris is dumped at the end of each 90-minute run, Krusznis said. Garbage is offloaded at Newark Bay and ends up in landfills.

Last year, skimmer boats ran each day from March to December and the operators work on the vessels in every kind of weather — extreme heat, cold, rain and snow. This year, the program's managers expect to run all four seasons, breaking only to perform maintenance on the vessels.

The River Restoration program was spearheaded by Kearny Councilwoman Carol Jean Doyle and is part of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners, whose executive director, Robert Davenport, keeps Gov. Jim McGreevey informed on the process of river cleanup from Newark to Rutherford.

The commission is the third largest wastewater treatment plant in the country and employs 550 people, 16 work with the cleanup program.

Cleanups began in 1998 and last spring received a \$588,029 grant to expand operations and allow for better facilities from which to set up their crews. The proposed Passaic River Skimmer Vessel Operations Facility will be located on the site of a former boat building business in North Arlington and provide the operation with a home base that is centrally located to where trash cleanups are performed.

Robert De Vita, the program manager, said cleanup began when volunteer groups, such as the Passaic River Rowing Association of Kearny, got together to remove by hand litter from riverbanks and shores.

The government got involved the following year, and former Gov. Christine Whitman began the restoration program by christening the 50-foot skimmer at the Liberty Landing in Jersey City. The program has drawn heat from at least one local environmental group, which says that skimming is a superficial way of cleaning the river. One of the group's board members

told The Observer that environmentalists should concentrate on how to remove highly toxic sediment at the bottom of the river, which varies in depth from about three to twenty feet.

De Vita, however, said that stirring up the chemicals, which have collected over the past century, would cause "enormous fishkills" and create a greater hazard to the environment.

The largest litterbugs of the river are outdated sewage systems and storm drains set up years ago to wash trash from the streets to the sea, DeVita said.

"All that garbage from the street ends up in the river, where our guys clean it up," DeVita said, adding that the drains "are an old system that would be too expensive to change."

The river also experiences contamination from Newark Bay and even New York Harbour. Krusznis said "all kinds of odd things" have been picked up in the water, among them dead river rats and possums. He said one crew came close to picking up a dead human body, but that it was spotted and removed by

police before the skimmer got near.

De Vita said that in the few years since the restoration program has been in place, he's seen a difference in the water quality, as evidenced by a return of wildlife.

"This year we saw egrets here by the flock," De Vita said. "Many people have given up on the river. But what they don't know is that before long it's going to make a comeback. This river is going to be a real asset to the community."



The huge claw-like grabbers of a Passaic Valley and Sewer Commissioners' boat scoop up an old tire, bottles and other non-biodegradable debris from the river near a Newark dock.