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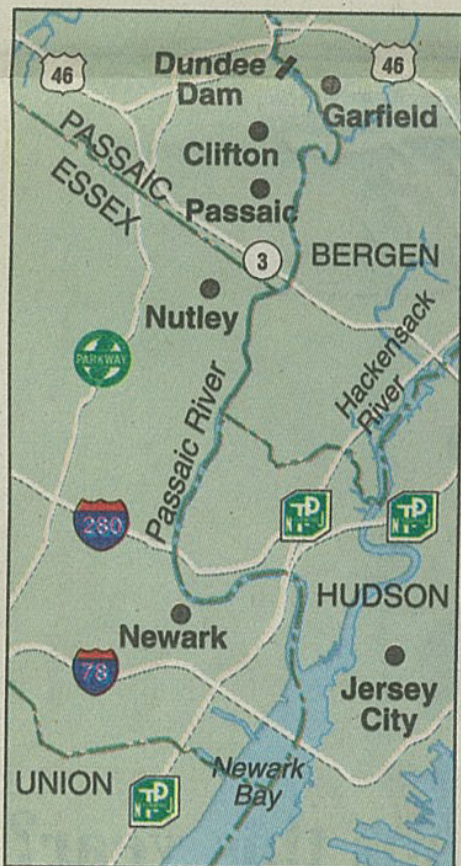
WEDNESDAY
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The river vile

Eco-tours look to focus attention on polluted Passaic



With Jersey City and Manhattan in the background, guests on the inaugural Passaic River Patrol got a scenic, and sometimes scented, tour of the river on Tuesday. STAFF PHOTOS BY CHRIS PEDOTA



THE RECORD

By ALEX NUSSBAUM
STAFF WRITER

The Passaic River offered a symphony of smells on Tuesday: a whiff of sewage treatment plant, the dead-skunk stink of fat-rendering, and a chemical scent, like strawberry bubble gum, from a local factory.

With that inauspicious beginning, environmentalists and local officials launched an ambitious campaign on Tuesday: turning the blighted river into a tourist attraction.

The goal is to boost public support for fighting pollution by getting more people out on the river. The model is the eco-cruise program run by Bergen County's Hackensack Riverkeeper, which has drummed up support for preserving the Meadowlands over the last decade.

"With the Hackensack, people kind of scratched their head and said, 'What is there to look at besides garbage?'" Bill Sheehan, Riverkeeper's executive

director, said during a news conference in Newark. "Today, we have a constituency that thinks the river is worth fighting for. That is the exact methodology we plan here."

By a dock outside the Passaic Valley Sewerage Authority, Sheehan announced the new tours, dubbed the Passaic River Patrol. The NY-NJ Baykeeper, the other non-profit group conducting the trips, and state and Essex County leaders also attended.

Supporters hope the trips will generate grass-roots support for public access to the river and for environmental restoration, such as the multimillion-dollar dredging suggested by activists and some state officials recently. The Riverkeeper's tours have given 25,000 people an up-close view of the Meadowlands since 1995. Now, the state is committed to preserving thousands of acres of wetlands there, supporters noted.

"The Passaic River has been a laugh-
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An auto salvage yard in Newark was one of the sorrier sights of the tour.

River: Foul odors

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ingstock for all these years," said Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo Jr. "All I heard growing up about the Passaic River was, 'Who's being dumped in it?'"

Beset by centuries of industrial dumping, litter, and untreated sewage, the Passaic holds a stew of PCBs, dioxins, heavy metals, and other toxic chemicals.

Tougher environmental rules and improved sewage treatment have improved water quality over the past generation, but the chemicals remain in the sediment below the water. They seep into the food chain, making fish inedible.

A trip up the river Tuesday gave visitors a whiff of a rendering plant, where dead animals and animal parts are processed into materials used in soap and other products.

At its lower end in Newark and Kearny, the Passaic was girdled with concrete, electrical wires, factories, and a junkyard. But there were signs of life: a snow-white egret snapping up a fish, a cormorant gliding past the boat.

The 90-minute Passaic River patrols will be limited to chartered tours for now. A Newark high school group is going on Friday; state and county politicians are scheduled for next week.

Organizers are constrained by their access point — the docks behind the Passaic Valley treatment

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JOSEPH DIVINCENZO JR.,
ESSEX COUNTY EXECUTIVE

plant — and the tight security at the site, they said. Sheehan lamented the symbolism: The only way onto the Passaic is through a sewage plant. Among environmentalists' goals for the river are more parks and boat launches.

The groups are searching for more accessible launching points, they said. Those interested in future trips can contact Baykeeper at (732) 888-9870 or mail@nynjbaykeeper.org.

The Passaic already has an advocate, the Basking Ridge-based Passaic River Coalition. Environmentalists downplayed any danger of a turf battle.

"The hope is that we can all keep our egos under control and find a way to work together," said Bill O'Hearn, director of the coalition's land trust. "Everything that gets people on the water and the water's edge is a good thing."

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