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# Filthy Anacostia gets attorney general's attention

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*Photo by Matt Birchenough. Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens on the Anacostia River provide a glimpse of the river's beauty despite its polluted state. Environmentalists and politicians believe the urban river's beauty can allow the waterway to be utilized more as a recreational resource if it is cleaned up.*

Published on: Wednesday, June 22, 2011

By Matt Birchenough

The state of Maryland continued its ongoing inspection of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries as Attorney General Doug Gansler led a June 16 audit of the Anacostia River.

The audit began at Bladensburg Waterfront Park with members of various environmental organizations joining the attorney general for the approximately hour-long boat ride.

"This is our 14th river audit and what we learn are issues that are unique to the particular river, this case the Anacostia River, and issues that are ubiquitous throughout the state of Maryland and we need to be able to address as a state," Gansler said.

The Anacostia faces a number of environmental issues hampering the overall quality of the river.

Lack of control of storm water contributes to most of the problems that limit the uses of the river, according to Brent Bolin, director of advocacy for the Anacostia Watershed Society.

"Under the federal clean water act, the goal is to have a fishable and swimmable river. Right now it's neither because of three main things: bacteria pollution, toxic pollution and sediment," Bolin said. "Most of that is really impacted by storm water runoff, which is when it rains on roads, parking lots, roofs. It collects dirt and trash and goes down storm drains straight out to the river."

Prince George's County's reaction to the storm water issue has been a point of distress for those looking to improve the Anacostia. Recently, County Executive Rushern Baker proposed a bill that would only require contractors to catch one inch of rainwater when building on new land and only a half-inch when building on already developed land, which are only the minimum standards set forth by the state.

Environmentalists want to enact legislation requiring land developers to catch 2.7 inches of rain, a standard already enacted in Montgomery County.

"Prince George's County right now has the perfect opportunity to pass a very strong storm water ordinance," Anacostia riverkeeper Dottie Yunger said. "They're backing down from doing it. We really want to see them step up to the plate because Montgomery County has already done it in many ways and the District of Columbia is looking for ways to do it."

In addition to storm water problems, the Anacostia is also riddled with trash, which could be seen in the forms of bottles and cans floating throughout the river, and has resulted in special legislation to address the issue.

"We're the second river in the nation to receive what's called a trash (Total Maximum Daily Load), and that's basically a Clean Water Act pollution diet," Bolin said. "Usually it's for chemical and toxic pollution, but we have so much trash in the Anacostia that we have a trash TMDL."



*Photo by Matt Birchenough. Trash sits in the Anacostia River near the docks of Bladensburg Waterfront Park. Maryland Attorney General Doug Gansler conducted an audit of the heavily polluted river, which has been hampered by lack of control of storm water runoff, toxic pollution and an abundance of trash entering the waterway.*



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To comply with the TMDL, Montgomery and Prince George’s County, as well as the District of Columbia, have a legal requirement to remove a certain amount of trash from the river each year, said Bolin.

Due to factors, such as storm water and trash, the river earned failing marks in recent evaluations.

“We just released, with Anacostia Riverkeeper, our first ever state of the river report card and we graded the river as failing on pretty much all measures,” Bolin said. However, he added that conditions are improving.

“The good news is that the indicators are going in the right directions, so things are improving, but they’re improving very, very slowly,” Bolin said. “Some things will take decades if not hundreds of years to reach water quality standards. So the message is we’re going in the right direction but not nearly fast enough.”

Although progress is slow, there is still belief in the river’s potential as beautiful waterway.

“What most people don’t recognize about the Anacostia River is how beautiful it is and how lush it is and how green it is,” Gansler said. “It’s not a type of thing where there’s industry abutting the river, (where) there’s big building or plants or houses. There’s green space.”

Ken Yetman, a biologist for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, echoed Gansler’s sentiments and added that the Anacostia could serve a major recreational purpose.

“It’s completely wooded on both sides. You think that you were some place way out in western Maryland,” Yetman said. “They’re putting in a bike path around here that’s eventually going to connect, and you’re going to be able to take your bicycle and go to a Nationals game.

“This is a real resource, but we need a lot more storm water management,” he continued. “We need a lot more control of trash and other things, but this could be a real resource for people and a real recreational gem.”

While it is important for residents to see the Anacostia’s value, it is ultimately more effective, Yunger said, if those in power learn of its potential.

“I think the main goal with this river audit for the Anacostia is making sure that our elected officials and our politicians know the issues that the Anacostia River is facing but also realize its potential,” she said. “And it’s not until you actually get out here and see the river and talk to those local communities that you’re able to experience that.”

Yunger went on to add that politicians can pass all the legislation they want, but the fate of the river ultimately comes down to enforcement.

“You can pass a really great law or regulation, but if it never gets enforced it doesn’t matter,” she said. “We want to work really closely with the attorney general and his office to make sure that the laws that are meant to protect our bodies of water in the state of Maryland, those laws are actually getting enforced.”

At this juncture, the attorney general appears to be on board with improving the Anacostia, and he believes that other politicians are behind him.

“People think environmentalists are bunch of left-wing liberals or whatever, but the fact of the matter is that’s not the case,” Gansler said. “It’s a very bipartisan issue now.”

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The Prince George’s Sentinel, published weekly by Berlyn Inc., is a community newspaper covering Prince George’s County, Maryland.

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