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## Departing society director reflects on efforts to clean Anacostia River

Connolly helped increase need for watershed restoration

by Elahe Izadi | Staff Writer



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When Jim Connolly began working for the Anacostia Watershed Society in 1992, he said the urban river was dismissed by residents in the Washington, D.C., region as "dirty, stinky and polluted."

"They used to call the Anacostia 'the forgotten river' because no one was paying any attention to it. Now it's a big priority," he said. "D.C. has since built a baseball stadium on [the waterfront]. If you tried that years ago, you would have been laughed at."

Since he first began working for the Bladensburg-based nonprofit, Connolly, 42, of Arlington, has seen the profile of the river, and his organization, raised in the region. He's stepping down at the end of the month to start a new career in residential real estate, saying it's time for him to start a new chapter in his life.

Connolly plans to help homeowners implement environmentally friendly features, like rain barrels and impervious pavement.

Connolly became executive director in 1996. He said one of the biggest challenges — and successes — he's seen is bringing together the racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse community that lives in the watershed to advocate for the river.

About 85 percent of the watershed is in Maryland, and 43 percent of it is in Prince George's County.

"The challenge was engaging the community with the right message," he said. "We learned that the environment is the common denominator for all of us. We all need clean water to drink."

Connolly said they began with clean-ups and tree-plantings, and then attended community, civic association and Town Council meetings where they joined up with residents to lobby on land-use issues.

Edmonston is building a \$1 million "green street," and resident support for the project started with a talk given by Connolly



Raphael Talisman/The Gazette  
 James F. Connolly (right), the Anacostia Watershed Society executive director, stands Friday at the Bladensburg Waterfront Park with Brent Bolin of Mount Rainer who will take Connolly's place at the Anacostia Watershed Society. The office of the society is located at The George Washington House in Bladensburg.

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to the town, Mayor Adam Ortiz said.

Rather than speak in very technical terms about storm water management, Ortiz said Connolly "has this amazing skill of connecting with people no matter who they were or where they came from ... He talked to you in a conversation. And to communities that historically haven't been as engaged [in environmental issues], that makes a big deal."

AWS horticulturist Steve McKindley emphasized Connolly's humor and "great people skills."

"We have to hustle money every day of the year to pay ourselves, and there's always pressure as a nonprofit to stay alive," McKindley said.

AWS president Jim Foster called Connolly's achievements "legendary."

"We're going to miss his insight and charming demeanor. He's able to bring people together," Foster said.


But the organization will be left in good hands, Connolly said. Mount Rainier resident Brent Bolin has been hired as director of advocacy and is taking on many of Connolly's roles.

Bolin said he wants to continue Connolly's community involvement focus.

"The 15 of us here aren't going to be able to restore the Anacostia alone," Bolin said. "Having been a citizen activist and coming from a community group, I believe that."


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