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Other harbor cleanups offer lessons to Baltimore

Boston, Washington and Norfolk offer different approaches

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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Fifteen years ago, the Charles River in Boston was so filthy with sewage that if a collegiate rower fell in the water, Bob Zimmerman recalls, he or she would be sent to the hospital for a tetanus shot and treatment with antibiotics.

Now, thanks to a massive and continuing cleanup effort, rowers, kayakers and other boaters need not fear for their safety, and swimming is even sanctioned, at least on dry days.

"The biggest thing we've done for the city is give the Charles back to the people," says Zimmerman, the executive director of the Charles River Watershed Association, a local citizen watchdog group. "It had been written off — 'dead river.' That's not true anymore."

Baltimore's harbor isn't the only urban waterway blighted by trash, sewage and toxic sediments. Other old port cities have begun to tackle their problems in earnest, and their experiences offer lessons to officials and residents here looking to remedy centuries of abuse and neglect. A daylong conference on cleaning up the harbor Saturday is expected to hear from environmental advocates from Boston, Washington and other cities about their progress and their still substantial challenges.

Boston's cleanup began more than 20 years ago, Zimmerman says, with a lawsuit brought by the Conservation Law Foundation and joined by the Environmental Protection Agency to halt sewage discharges into the harbor. In the 1990s, a new regional EPA administrator grew impatient, levying millions of dollars in fines. Around that time, the lower stretch of the Charles was deemed safe for swimming less than 20 percent of the time and safe for boating less than 40 percent of the time.

The EPA negotiated "consent orders" with the city and with the local water and sewer commission to survey their aging network of sewer lines and find and fix backups, storm-related overflows and chronic leaks. When the mandated overhaul is done around 2013, he says, the amount of rain-diluted sewage flowing into the river should be vastly reduced. Meanwhile, Zimmerman says, the Charles is deemed safe for boating virtually all the time and good enough for swimming 60 percent to 75 percent of the time, as long as it hasn't rained a lot.

To help the public know when the river's safe, the association hoists color-coded flags at boat houses along the river. Red indicates high levels of bacteria, yellow the presence of potentially harmful algae, and blue that the water's fine.

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"Blue flags fly most of the time," Zimmerman says.

In the Washington area, the Anacostia River is the focus of a multibillion-dollar restoration plan that calls for cleaning up trash choking its shores, fixing chronic sewage overflows and "greening" vast areas of the District of Columbia and its suburbs where rainwater now hits pavement and washes pollutants into streams.

"Everything was being dumped here — tires and cars, in addition to sewage and toxics and such, trash, trash, trash," says James R. Foster, president of the Anacostia Watershed Society. A high percentage of catfish checked in the river have lesions and tumors on them, he notes, which may be linked to the residues of long-banned pesticides and other harmful chemicals buried in the sediments.

The society started by filing suit to force area governments to fix chronic overflows of sewage because sewers were combined with storm drains and could not handle the rainfall that flooded into the pipes.

The district government is excavating huge tunnels under the city to hold the overflows of diluted sewage until it can be piped after storms to the Blue Plains wastewater treatment plant, at a projected cost of \$2.5 billion. A legally mandated, years-long fix-up of miles of clogged and leaking pipes is also under way.

Local governments are also under orders from the EPA to get 800 tons of trash out of the river — a mandate similar to one Baltimore City and the county are likely to face in the next year to deal with the litter-strewn harbor. Two debris "traps" have been placed across a pair of streams that feed into the Anacostia, but much more needs to be done, Foster says.

At the behest of Congress, the Army Corps of Engineers drew up a plan for restoring the Anacostia across its 176-square mile watershed, which stretches into Prince George's and Montgomery counties. It calls for restoring stream banks, recreating wetlands and curtailing polluted runoff, among other things, and making the river swimmable and fishable by 2032. The projected cost \$1.7 billion.

"It's a road map for us, if we could follow it," says Foster. The district government and Montgomery County are trying by raising by some fees, he said, but the overall funding committed by all levels of government is woefully inadequate. "We know what the problems are; we just need the spine and the will to do some things."

At the other end of the bay, Hampton Roads is beginning to restore the Elizabeth River, starting with sediments there so laden with toxic chemicals from industry that the fish have tumors. Because of the contaminants found in each, the Elizabeth, the Anacostia and Baltimore's harbor all have been deemed the three worst toxic hotspots in the Chesapeake Bay.

Spearheading the cleanup effort in Virginia is the Elizabeth River Project, a nonprofit group that brings together business, government and community leaders. Its first major project involved dredging up bottom sediments at a place called Money Point, where creosote, a preservative made from coal and wood tar, had been dumped from a long-closed factory and what fish could be found mostly had cancer.

"We're restoring this river from the bottom up, says Joe Rieger, the group's director of watershed restoration.

Once the most tainted sediments were removed, a 1.3 acre patch of bottom was covered with a layer of sand to shield fish and wildlife from further contamination, and then grasses were planted to create a wetland. The initial effort cost more than \$2 million, Rieger says. Some of the money came from the federal government, but much of it came from fees paid by shipping interests for dredging the river.

Now, Rieger says, levels of toxic chemicals in the water have dropped dramatically, and 17 different species of fish have been spotted around the new wetland.

This summer, Rieger says, the group hopes to dredge some more tainted bottom, put more sand down and then create a reef where oysters can grow.

"Ultimately we want to clean up all of it" by 2020, he says. And instead of relying on legal action or government orders, the Virginia group has tried to work cooperatively with local governments and industries.

"The carrot is much more effective in our world than the stick," he says. "Trying to restore an urban river is really based on trust. ... You can't wave a wand and see change overnight. But there are significant ways to get people to make differences."

tim.wheeler@baltsun.com



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