

## **New England Urban Rivers Conference – March 29, 2007**

### **Plenary Session: Urban River and Environmental Justice Success in Rhode Island**

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Presented by Jenny Periera of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council

Good Morning. I am truly honored to be here –I came to the Woonasquatucket effort in 2000, the story of the Woonasquatucket began long before that –I regret that you all don't have the opportunity to meet Jane –for without Jane Sherman, there would not be a story to tell.

The Woonasquatucket's history is like many urban rivers in New England – the River was the engine that fueled Rhode Island's economic development in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then as the economy changed, it was left behind, abandoned, hidden, neglected – seen more as a liability than an asset.

The story of the restoration of the Woonasquatucket River begins in Olneyville. In 1993, Olneyville was the most disadvantaged, underserved and impoverished neighborhood in Providence. The late Fred Lippitt, Chair of an urban renewal organization called "The Providence Plan" decided that something must be done! What did Olneyville have? A tour of the area gave them the answer. They saw degraded and closed parks, abandoned industrial sites, and a hidden, trashed and neglected river. Olneyville had a River. This group identified reclamation of the Woonasquatucket River and its adjacent lands as the catalyst for change and renewal in the neighborhoods along the river corridor.

The outside vision of Olneyville was not so optimistic - criminals lived in Olneyville, no real people lived in Olneyville, and anything you do in Olneyville will be destroyed... residents claimed that... Olneyville did not have an environment, no one will help Olneyville, The goal of most people living in Olneyville was to leave.

The first step was to connect with the community along the river. Enter Jane Sherman. This effort began with 18 months of listening to and working with community residents as they addressed their critical issues - crime, affordable housing, and keeping their children safe. Jane found that few were aware of the river and the abandoned parks and spaces that lined its banks. The challenge was to build value and eventually stewardship for these neglected assets.

In 1995, the first river festival celebrating the cultural diversity of the neighborhood was held. The day before the festival, a section along the River, overgrown with knotweed and brush was cleared and canoes were brought to the bank. As folks arrived for the event, they could not believe what they were seeing. "Where did you get the river?" they asked. Over 500 people canoed on the river that day, and it was a turning point in efforts to establish the river as a neighborhood asset.

In late 1995, and through the spring of 1996 five volunteer architects met with Olneyville residents to develop a vision for their neighborhood. The residents requested a bicycle path - not only for recreation, but for transportation - to get to stores, churches and social services. They wanted green - grass and flowers. To them, the Brownfields were opportunities to create linear green spaces and paths along the river reconnecting parks and

neighborhoods to each other. This community vision was the basis for the Master Plan for the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project.

Jane and her new sidekick the amazing Lisa Aurecchia began organizing programs in earnest – to bring people back to the River and the parks. They organized canoe and kayak programs and soccer and kickball tournaments, kite flying, anything to bring people back to these abandoned public spaces. With grants from EPA Region I, the Wallace-Reader’s Digest and the Merck Family Fund they developed environmental justice and environmental education programs for the schools and community centers. Over 400 residents toured the 19 mile long Woonasquatucket River watershed - to see for themselves the potential of their river. They saw that the river that flowed behind their homes was also home to great blue heron, fish, turtles and hawk, that this same river had places to swim and fish and recreate in the north, and this Woonasquatucket River formed Waterplace Park in downtown Providence before flowing out into Narragansett Bay.

At the same time she was working on the local level, Jane was also casting a broad net - taking everyone she could - elected officials and representatives of federal and state agencies on tours to demonstrate the potential for change in the river corridor. Early on, Jane gave a tour of the area to a group of environmentalists from Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts. The third stop on the trip was one of our Brownfield sites, “riverside mills”. Jane shared a vision of greenspace, a bicycle path, and recreational opportunities for the neighborhood as the group tripped over the rubble and debris, mounds of tires and trash. After they returned to the bus, Jane asked them for their comments and any recommendations. There was a very long silence. Then, from the back of the bus, a voice rose up and said “We will pray for you.”

Their reaction was a common one. People recognized the need for change, but were simply overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge. These tours helped to bring technical expertise and funding for the project from many sources. The Brownfield Showcase Community designation brought significant funding and assistance from EPA, and the American Heritage River designation earned support from EPA, the US Forest Service, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and RI DEM. With help from the EPA and The Rhode Island Foundation, the Woonasquatucket River Greenway Project became the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, an independent nonprofit in 2001 and added watershed restoration initiatives to its mission of creating the Greenway.

Urban initiatives are complicated, expensive endurance trials! We began as a simple park and green space revitalization project. We have had to deal with a collapsed pedestrian bridge over a highway, the loss of historic mill buildings to arson, a combined sewer overflow project that proposed using parks space for sewage storage, and sites contaminated with petroleum, arsenic and volatile organic compounds. The dioxin contamination of the river sediment at the Centredale Manor Superfund site remains a challenging obstacle to restoring the river, and we are working with EPA and our communities to ensure that the river will one day be fishable and swimmable.

Indeed, Olneyville remains challenged. 54% of children under 18 live in poverty, and the median family income is the lowest in the city. Owner occupancy of residential units is 18%. But change is happening ...

Since 1994, the Woonasquatucket project has led to the restoration of over 52 acres of publicly owned property for the recreational use of neighborhood residents. The Narragansett Bay Commission annually brings heavy equipment to remove large debris from the river. Three parks are restored and reopened, with an additional two new parks in progress. With support

from the RI Department of Transportation and our US Senators, the Woonasquatucket River Greenway, a five mile bicycle trail, from WaterPlace Park to the Johnston line is well under construction. With the support of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Jessie B. Cox Trust, the Gregson Foundation, the RI DEM, the RI Coastal Resources Management Council, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and property owners, there are multiple fish passage, wetland and riparian buffer restoration initiatives ongoing throughout the watershed. The first fish ladder on the Rising Sun dam, owned by Struever Brothers, Eccles & Rouse will be constructed this summer. Economic reinvestment is occurring in Olneyville, with over \$300 million dollars in new projects completed and/or planned. At Riverside Mills, one of the emerging new parks along the River (The site of the “we’ll pray for you tour”) has been remediated, the section of the bike path is almost complete through the site, over 1,000 plants have been installed as part of a wetland and riparian restoration effort, funding is in place for a fish ladder, and a canoe launch has been built. Olneyville Housing Corporation secured ownership of the vacant lots across from this site providing over 57 new units of affordable rental and home ownership opportunities for local residents. Riverside Mills illustrates that restoration of an urban river can lead to the rebirth of a neighborhood.

As Yogi Bera said: "If they say it can't be done, it doesn't always work out that way,"

For more information: [www.woonasquatucket.org](http://www.woonasquatucket.org)