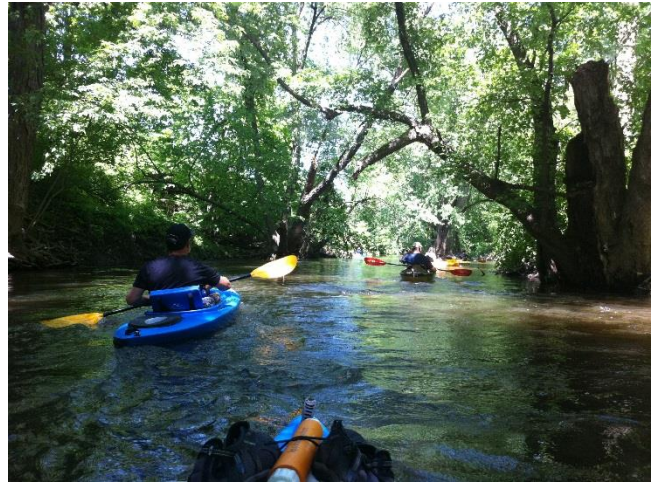


## Still River Watershed Management Plan *Executive Summary*

The story of the Still River is a story of comeback.

The Still River has made a remarkable recovery after decades of being treated like an open industrial sewer. The 1972 federal Clean Water Act combined with state and local efforts to address pollution from industry and wastewater treatment plants have made great progress towards improving the water quality of the Still River, making it a healthier ecosystem and safer place for people to visit and enjoy.



But we still have work to do.



Despite these advances, the Still River continues to be one of the most polluted in the Housatonic Valley. 36% of all tributary streams in the watershed, including the majority of the Still River mainstem, are classified as “impaired” by the State of Connecticut for recreational use and/or aquatic life due to poor water quality. This means that concentrations of pollutants regularly spike above levels safe for human contact, and populations of aquatic organisms have changed dramatically from what would be expected in a healthy river.

Not only is poor water quality a problem for public health, fish and wildlife, but it also represents missed opportunities for watershed communities. The Still River has the potential to be an incredible resource; a place where residents and visitors alike can go to swim, paddle, fish, explore riverside trails, reconnect with nature and learn from the landscape.



## Building Partnerships

Since 2014, people who care about the Still River and recognize its potential as a community asset have been working together to continue its comeback story. This group is called the **Still River Partners (SRP)**. SRP members come from watershed communities, state, federal and regional agencies, and non-profits with an interest in watershed protection and management. The SRP is the driving force behind this Watershed Plan. SRP members have collectively committed thousands of hours of effort to understanding the state of the Still River and its watershed, articulating a shared vision for its future, and identifying the steps we need to take to get there. The SRP identified six key focus areas for management of the Still River watershed, which became the framework of this Watershed Plan:

1. **Water Quality**
2. **Capacity Building and Collaboration**
3. **Outdoor Recreation**
4. **Climate Resilience and Floodplain Management**
5. **Species and Habitats**
6. **Education and Outreach**



## Characterizing the Still River

The first step in the Watershed Plan development process was to gather existing research and planning relevant to watershed management, using the focus areas identified by the SRP as a guide. The Housatonic Valley Association (HVA) with support from other SRP members pulled together an inventory of over 300 references- things like water quality studies, town planning documents and maps of proposed trails. HVA and the SRP waded through this trove of relevant information to create a detailed summary, organized by focus area. Meanwhile, HVA staff were collecting new information about the state of the Still River and its watershed. HVA walked 30 stream miles in the watershed to look for restoration opportunities - places where the SRP can work to reduce pollution and flood risk, restore habitat and enhance river access.



The summary of existing research and planning and the results of HVA's field investigations were combined into the **Still River Watershed Existing Conditions Report (ECR)**. HVA circulated a draft of the ECR to the SRP and other stakeholders with specific expertise, and incorporated the comments received into the document. This updated version of the ECR was then used as the basis for a public outreach effort. HVA staff visited public meetings in six watershed communities, presenting the findings of the ECR and explaining how people could submit additional comments. Comments received were incorporated into the final ECR document.



## Envisioning the Future and Setting Goals

Using the final Still River Watershed Existing Conditions Report as a guide, the Still River Partners worked together to create the following **Vision Statement** for the Still River Watershed:

***“A healthy Still River is the heart of watershed communities, providing safe, easily accessible recreation opportunities for people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities - including swimming, boating, fishing, and riverside trails. The Still River provides opportunities for learning about and connecting with the natural world. Watershed stakeholders work collaboratively to:***

- ***Protect and improve water quality and quantity***
- ***Conserve important species and habitats***
- ***Enhance the climate change resiliency of the built and natural environments***
- ***Balance the economic development goals of watershed communities with conservation of natural resources***

***These efforts serve as a model for other industrialized watersheds in Connecticut.”***

The next step in the Watershed Planning process was to develop a set of Goals that must be achieved in order to realize the SRP’s vision for the future of the Still River. The SRP worked collaboratively to develop Goals for each of the six key Focus Areas:

### **Water Quality**

1. Improve water quality of the Still River and its tributaries to meet Connecticut Water Quality Standards for recreation and habitat for fish, other aquatic life and wildlife by reducing, respectively, *E. coli* indicator bacteria and other pollutants. The latter includes but is not limited to metals, chlorine and nutrients, especially for waterbodies where Total Maximum Daily Loads have been established.
2. Maintain a water quality monitoring program.
3. Assist municipalities with Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System General Permit compliance.
4. Support adoption of policies and programs at the municipal level that restore and protect water quality and quantity consistent with the Connecticut State Water Plan.
5. Encourage use of green infrastructure (GI) and low impact development (LID) solutions for new development and seek opportunities to replace older infrastructure with GI and LID to reduce impervious cover throughout the watershed



### **Capacity Building & Collaboration**

1. Enhance and maintain collaboration between watershed municipalities; regional, state and federal agencies; non-profits; utilities and other stakeholders to support the implementation of the watershed plan.
2. Secure adequate resources to accomplish watershed management goals.
3. Promote the sharing of data, technical support and other resources for watershed management.

### **Outdoor Recreation**

1. Create, enhance and maintain safe, easily accessible river-based recreational opportunities for people of all ages and abilities, balancing recreational access with conservation.



2. Enhance connectivity of recreational trails both along the Still River and with watershed communities, as well as regional and statewide trail systems.
3. Integrate and include recreation enhancement with watershed management projects.

### ***Climate Resilience and Flooding***

1. Protect and restore fully functioning floodplains.
2. Implement climate resilient strategies in watershed communities.

### ***Natural Heritage (Species & Habitats)***

1. Create a natural flora and fauna resource inventory throughout the watershed to identify key areas of restoration and conservation. Share this information with land-use decision makers and other key stakeholders.
2. Promote habitat connectivity, urban biodiversity, and regional conservation through partnerships between land trusts, municipalities, and landowners.
3. Investigate and promote native habitat and invasive species management.
4. Promote land preservation and sustainable land management practices.

### ***Education & Outreach***

1. Educate community members about environmental stewardship and engage them in practical ways to improve water quality.
2. Create opportunities for people of all ages and backgrounds to learn about and from the Still River and its watershed.



## **Making the Action Plan**

Once the Vision and Goals were established, the next step in the Watershed Planning process was to identify specific actions that the Still River Partners and the public can take to work towards a healthier, safer Still River. Actions were generally organized as **non-construction programs** (actions like water quality monitoring and educating youth about the Still River) and **construction projects** (actions like planting trees along a stream or capturing polluted runoff from a parking lot in a raingarden).



The Still River Partners identified over 50 programmatic action items over the six focus areas, aimed at everything from supporting municipal stormwater management programs to enhancing river access for paddlers and fishermen to providing advice for lawn management to homeowners wanting to make a difference on their own property.

HVA in cooperation with the SRP used the results of their field assessments to identify over 40 potential construction projects. The SRP worked collaboratively to prioritize these projects for implementation based on pollution reduction potential, landowner commitment and willingness to partner, and other potential benefits such as recreation enhancement or habitat restoration. The SRP then worked with Didona Associates Landscape Architects, LLC to create Preliminary Designs, cost estimates and implementation strategies for ten top-ranked projects. Preliminary Design packages can be used cultivate support for projects and secure funding.



## Implementing the Watershed Plan

The final Still River Watershed Management Plan (Watershed Plan) is comprised of the Existing Conditions Report, the Vision and Goals and the Action Plan. The Watershed Plan was officially finalized on September 30th, 2019 - but completing the plan is just the start of our collective effort. We'll now begin the hard work of completing the Actions we've identified as essential to accomplishing our goals and realizing our shared Vision for the Still River and its watershed.

Encouragingly, the SRP has already begun Watershed Plan implementation, and resources to jump-start priority projects have been secured. Since 2017, SRP members have completed projects such as: the Erickson Road Canoe Launch in New Milford (HVA), the Brookfield Town Hall Stormwater Detention Basin in Brookfield (Northwest Conservation District) and the Bennett Park Stream Restoration in Bethel (HVA). At the time of this writing, additional funding for priority project development had been confirmed through the FY2019 Clean Water Act Section 319 Grants Program.

Youth from watershed communities helped to build the projects listed above (and many others) through the Still River Watershed Connections (Connections) program coordinated by HVA. This program connects local youth with volunteer opportunities working on restoration projects through partnerships between the SRP and area schools and youth service organizations. Participating youth gain valuable job skills and develop a sense of stewardship for the Still River while providing much-needed volunteer help for implementing restoration projects. Connections will continue to be a valuable resource for implementing the watershed plan and, in turn, youth participation in restoration efforts will continue to create more advocates for the Still River.



Most importantly, this planning process has built and strengthened partnerships that are crucial to addressing issues like pollution and flooding at a watershed scale. The role of the SRP will now shift from guiding Watershed Plan development to driving implementation and fostering continued collaboration between watershed communities, state, federal and regional agencies and non-profit groups with a stake in the management of the Still River watershed.

There is a long road ahead of us, as we work towards realizing our shared Vision for the Still River and its watershed, but we have the strength of our partnerships and the clarity of our shared purpose to see us through. The **Watershed Plan is our roadmap towards a Still River that is swimmable and fishable, that provides opportunities to connect with and learn from nature for people of all backgrounds, ages and abilities, which is resilient to the effects of climate change, and supports thriving species and habitats.** The Still River we envision is an asset for watershed communities, a point of pride for watershed residents, and a draw for visitors to the region. Implementing the Watershed Plan, together, is how we get there.