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Our squandered river

Like many other northern New England cities, Montpelier has a river running through it. The Winooski was once a wild phenomenon of nature. It was cherished by the indigenous Native Americans and respected for its life-giving waters. Montpelier underwent earlier levels of development and occupation that required building walls along the banks so our river was channeled to stabilize foundations for granite sheds and easy cargo loading. About a hundred years ago, the Winooski was dammed to power the local trolley.

Today, we use the shores of the Winooski for parking commuter cars. Parking lots on the old industrial foundations ensure there is not yet a place downtown to get near the water, if, for no other reason, just to simply enjoy it. If water is life, as we all know to be true, why are we squandering this precious resource?

Most “smart” cities realize their riverfront is a potential development asset. Boston is known for the Esplanade along the Charles. San Antonio has made its small local river a center of downtown night life. The High Line in Manhattan creates a downtown garden park with view on the Hudson. Closer to home, look what happened to Burlington when the rail yards, down by the lake, were transformed into a waterfront park. This leads me to ask again, why are we squandering the potentially prime asset of our riverfront?

Unfortunately, the parking lots along the river also contribute significantly to the large amount of sewage Montpelier dumps into the river during every rain event. Along the Winooski, those acres of hard pavement on the riverbank mean there is always a lot of toxic runoff rushing into our sewers and the river itself. We tend to forget rivers’ natural banks and their plants can provide environmental services. They buffer and then filter for rains and floods. The way we now use the riverfront, there is no chance for run-off to be cleaned by the land and the tree roots that should be in that land. It’s time to look at the river as a crucial element [of] our climate-changed future.

If you drive along Route 2 between Main Street and Granite Street, you clearly see the destruction. In midwinter, avalanches of snow, sand and salt cascade down from parking lots, onto the frozen river. By early spring, the snow and ice is gone, but the dust-colored, ravaged banks are choked with rocks, grass and occasional weed trees. This stretch of river offers no attraction whatsoever. No wonder the idea of

turning our attention towards the river has real trouble taking root. Whatever could be done looks expensive, so it's better not to think about it.

All of those insults are just today's challenges and don't begin to include the coming ravages from climate change. Future weather events promise to make Irene's floods look tame. The riverfront's former flood plains, now dedicated to farms and towns, will be incapable of providing natural protections. The '27 and '92 floods give us a hint of what devastation will be in store from globally warmed rain events.

We can change these scenarios. We could choose to help mitigate and adapt to such flooding threats. Such a response will require us to view our river as both a resource and as a challenge. It's past time to look at ways to collectively respond. Lots of research shows upstream forested buffers can help slow down and absorb flood threats. We can stabilize the banks with appropriate plantings and re-sculpting them with setbacks and trees. The riverfront at Two Rivers Farm could be planted to provide flood protection.

A few years ago, we created the Sustainable Montpelier Design Competition to engage designers and the citizens in what could be. The winning design, along with the other four finalists, incorporated a number of visions of what our downtown riverfront could become. The winning design even extended the vision all along our river. It's time for such dreams to inform our coming actions.

We believe a coalition of the private and public entities, dedicated to a rebirth of our river, could transform its banks to a green and welcoming landscape. This, in turn, would both immensely improve the attraction of downtown while also helping provide some protection from coming rain events. But such an effort needs to happen soon.

The simplest starting place would be to support and organize lots of manageable local efforts through key organizations like the Friends of the Winooski, the River Conservancy, the Tree Board, the Conservation Commission and the new downtown master planning study. Together, as neighborhoods, schools and churches, we can build rain gardens and create demonstration projects of swales and riparian plantings for capturing stormwater running down our hillsides. We could plant trees to stabilize the river banks where the roots can suck up excess run-off. We can find other uses for our downtown land rather than hard-surface parking lots.

Such projects will show people can actually see what is needed and what is possible. These responses won't happen unless there is a lively and focused discussion of the priorities needed to stop neglecting our precious river. It's time to reclaim it.

Dan Jones is Sustainable Montpelier Coalition executive director.