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Wednesday, December 17, 2014

# Blackstone Valley celebrates national park designation



Photo by Dan Dwyer. Clockwise from left: Trustees James Calhoun and Fred Williams, Dick Green, Michael Corbett, and Charlene Perkins Cutler.

Merry Christmas from **RICHARD J. RAFFERTY EDEN, RAFFERTY, TETREAU & ERLICH** ATTORNEYS AT LAW

By **Susan Spencer** TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
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WOONSOCKET, R.I. — Charlene Perkins Cutler, executive director of the nonprofit Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Inc., was watching her computer with bated breath Friday as the U.S. Senate voted on the National Defense Authorization Act.

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It wasn't the funding for armed services that concerned her, it was the inclusion of the act to establish the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park.

When the bill passed by a vote of 89-11 and was sent to President Obama to be signed, Ms. Perkins Cutler said she called Donna M. Williams of Grafton, chairwoman of the board of directors, and said, "We've got to have a party."

Tuesday evening, some 50 people, many of whom had been pushing for a national park in the Blackstone River Valley of Massachusetts and Rhode Island for 30 years, gathered at the National Heritage Corridor headquarters at the former Woonsocket train depot to pop the cork, pour some bubbly and revel in the moment.

"These are really encouraging times in the Valley," Ms. Perkins Cutler said, noting also that the legislation expands the boundaries of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor to include Auburn, Massachusetts, and more areas of Providence. The two-state National Heritage Corridor now encompasses 25 communities.

The Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park will be within the national heritage corridor.

Although the management details need to be worked out over coming months, and the funding for the park has yet to be determined, the legislation gives national park designation to the Blackstone River and Canal and its tributaries as well as five nationally significant sites: Rhode Island's Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket, Slatersville (North Smithfield) and Ashton Village (Cumberland); and Whitinsville (Northbridge) and Hopedale historic districts in Massachusetts.

Management of the national park will be coordinated in partnership with the nonprofit Blackstone Heritage Corridor Inc.

Meghan Kish, superintendent of the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park and the Roger Williams National Memorial in Providence, will serve as superintendent of the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park. Ms. Kish said she expected Mr. Obama would sign the bill into law this week.

Although the original plan did not call for the Blackstone River National Park to own land, unlike most other national parks, the final legislation allows for Rhode Island to transfer its Blackstone River State Park in Lincoln to the National Park Service, according to Harry T. Whitin, a descendant of Northbridge industrialist Paul Whitin and a director of Blackstone Heritage Corridor.

U.S. Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I., who with Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., and support of the Massachusetts delegation championed the legislation on Capitol Hill, told the crowd in Woonsocket that becoming a national park "allows us to continue to tell the important story of the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution and what it meant."

He added: "Everyone understood that there was something special about the Blackstone Valley."

Worcester City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. sent a message thanking the collaborative efforts of citizens of both states to recognize the national historical significance of the region.

Mr. Cicilline said afterward that national park designation "brings substantial additional federal resources" compared to the temporary support of the National Heritage Corridor Commission over the years. It would ensure a permanent role for park rangers, technical assistance and other programmatic support.

And since many people look to national parks for travel, Mr. Cicilline said, "It brings a destination that really raises the profile of the valley."

He predicted there would likely be additional economic development that spins off from the national park.

Ms. Williams, who testified last year before the House Subcommittee on Natural Resources, thanked the wisdom of those who envisioned a national park in the region as far back as the late 1970s.

"It's been down on its heels but they knew it had good bones," she said about the former mill towns and vestiges of early industrial communities. "They could see the history was still there."

The National Heritage Corridor was designated in 1986 and periodic studies assessed its role in telling the

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American industrialization story, as well as the role of the Blackstone River and Canal in shaping the manufacturing and commercial landscape of the Northeast. A special resource study released in 2011 prompted the legislative drive for designation as a national park.

Jeannie Hebert, president and CEO of the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce in Whitinsville, said after the program, "This is going to help us complete a lot of projects that have been in flux for so long," such as the Blackstone River Greenway bike and pedestrian path and the proposed Whitinsville industrial history museum in the renovated Whitin 1826 brick mill at Alternatives. "This is really going to be a shot in the arm for all that."

"Credibility: That's what the park gives Whitinsville," Mr. Whitin said.

Christopher Hookie, Central Valley district manager for Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, said the national park's presence would help promote the several state parks in the area, including Blackstone River and Canal Heritage State Park in Uxbridge, Douglas State Forest and Purgatory Chasm State Reservation in Sutton.

DCR Field Operations Team Leader and Park Superintendent Val Stegemoen said, "With designation of the river (in the national park), water quality issues come into play. And the canal — that allows for improvement of the locks and maybe canal boats."

"It could bring an influx of money," said Devon Kurtz, project coordinator for the Worcester Blackstone Visitors Center. The Middle River, which the new visitors center will border after it is completed in 2016, is a tributary to the Blackstone River. Mr. Kurtz said he is already working on programs and exhibits to involve the community with the river landscape, including teaching a landscape architecture class on the topic this spring at the College of the Holy Cross.

"It certainly is going to affect the whole area," said Justine Brewer, a director of Daniels Farmstead in Blackstone and president of Southwick's Zoo in Mendon, as she savored the evening's refreshments. "And it's a long time coming."

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