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Railroad problems go beyond flood

Letter to the Editor

Tuesday April 13, 2010

I wasn't able to contact the true heroes that stopped the train from going into the breach until after Scott Stafford's April 9 piece, "Train saved from doom" had gone to press, but credit for stopping the train goes to Ryan Sabourin and Julia Berkowitz.

On Monday, April 5, Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT) received a call from Gretchen DeBartolo saying the Housatonic River was full of sediment and stuff that looked sort of like sawdust floating on top. I grabbed my camera and drove to Pomeroy Avenue to investigate. There I met Ryan and Julia. Together we followed the river upstream and found the breach of the berm under the railroad tracks, and water rushing from Morewood Lake into the Housatonic River.

Ryan called 911 and told the fire department about the dangerous situation. About that time James Conant and his family arrived, and my husband, Bruce Winn also arrived. Then we heard the train whistle. Ryan and Julia immediately headed in the direction of the whistle to stop the train. The engineers had already been alerted by Ryan's call to 911 and the train stopped easily.

Thank you to all those who noticed problems in the Housatonic River, and especially to Ryan Sabourin and Julia Berkowitz for saving the day! This near accident follows a week after another Housatonic Railroad train derailed in Lee with one car ending

up in the Housatonic River there.

In December 2009, BEAT commented on the proposal to locate the Interstate BioFuels facility on the Housatonic Railroad line in Lenoxdale. One of our major concerns was the transporting of dangerous fuel, methanol, on Housatonic Railroad lines given how often their trains derail next to or into the Housatonic River. We suggested several other locations for the facility, all next to CSX tracks rather than Housatonic Railroad tracks, and suggested that if the facility were to use Housatonic Railroad tracks there should be a requirement that the tracks be improved.

The Housatonic Railroad does not respect our state or local environmental regulations. While CSX had filed a Notice of Intent for work in Richmond, the Housatonic Railroad, within 48 hours of the events described above, installed a small pipe and filled in the berm where the breach had occurred, apparently using no erosion control measures to prevent further contamination of our river. They did not apply for or even contact local and state officials to ask about an emergency permit.

JANE WINN

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The writer is executive director, Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT).

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