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Montgomery project aims to restore streams

By: Greg Forester , Staff Writer

The best course, it turns out, is a crooked one

MONTGOMERY — Beginning Thursday, one of Montgomery's waterways will play host to a restoration designed to demonstrate the newest methods in returning New Jersey's streams back to their natural state.

The restoration project — being undertaken by the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association at Pike Run in the vicinity of Montgomery Park — will eventually involve installation of concrete structures into the stream in a project that watershed officials say is the first of its kind in New Jersey.

"The structures are meant to redirect the flow of the stream back to its normal flow," said Jennifer Coffey, environmental policy specialist and director at the watershed association. "This will reduce erosion and help create a better environment for stream life to live in."

Streams such as Pike Run currently flow in a very straight course due to development on stream banks and increased runoff from impervious surfaces common in developments.

The natural flow of the stream, prior to heavy development, is to wind back and forth, creating small pools for wildlife to congregate and reducing the impact of erosive forces on the walls of the stream.

Streams like Pike Run end up leaving their natural winding pattern for a straighter course because of high water volume during periods of rain when runoff from surrounding development causes the stream to swell larger than normal, according to watershed officials.

The high water volume has straightened out the stream, eroded the banks, and created an environment that is not conducive to the normal development of aquatic life, Ms. Coffey said.

The straight channel also fails to provide ample rippling and bubbling, which helps re-oxygenate the stream and promote aquatic life.

The installation of the structures, known as "single-wing" deflectors, will attempt to provide the stream with a more natural meandering pattern and help Pike Run back to its natural, predevelopment condition.

Watershed officials said they believe this project and its results will be incredibly important to New Jersey, because of the state of many of New Jersey's waterways.

Many of New Jersey's waterways are in a condition similar to Pike Run, with development on their banks and an inability to widen the stream to correct the flow, Ms. Coffey said.

If the Pike Run restoration is a success, watershed officials said they hope it will demonstrate how streams in New Jersey can be restored without costly widening projects that could be impossible because of development.

Montgomery Township officials said they are pleased with the potential of the restoration project.

"What the watershed association is going to be doing at Pike Run is pretty unique," said Montgomery Township Information Officer Tammy Garaffa. "We're really excited about what it will do."

The kickoff of the restoration project will involve the preliminary work of restoring former wetlands in the Pike Run's environs that are currently being mowed over as a lawn in what will be the first phase of the project.

Watershed officials and volunteers intend to plant a dozen species of plants on the former wetland in an attempt to return the 1.27-acre plot to functioning wetland.

"We're getting native grasses and shrubs from two local nurseries," said Ms. Coffey.

Watershed officials said the new plants and grasses would help the wetlands filter out pollutants that may get into the stream system.

The actual placement of the stream structures will take place in August, along with more plantings to shore up Pike Run's banks in strategic locations.

Getting permission for the work has not been easy, according to Ms. Garaffa.

"They had to go through a lot with the Department of Environmental Protection," said Ms. Garaffa. "Even though it's a restoration project and they're improving the state of the stream, the work is still highly regulated."

The work begins on Thursday, with two three-hour shifts on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Watershed association representatives ask volunteers to register ahead of time, and to wear boots and comfortable clothes they don't mind getting a little dirty.

Interested persons are asked to contact Peggy Savage, environmental scientist at the watershed association, at (609) 737-3735.