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DEVELOPMENT; Yonkers Pursuing Plan to Take the Lid Off a River

By BARBARA WHITAKER

LOOKING across Larkin Plaza from the Metro-North Railroad station here, over the trees and the cars in the parking lots, it is hard to imagine that the Saw Mill River courses below.

"If you put your ear to the storm drain at the top of Larkin Plaza on the corner of Warburton Avenue and Manor House Square, you can hear it," said Bob Walters, who for years has advocated "daylighting" the river, or exposing it by tearing up the concrete and landscaping that cover it.

From 1917 to 1922, tunnels were built to carry the river as it snakes around downtown from Chicken Island -- now mostly a wide expanse of parking lots near Getty Square -- to Larkin Plaza, where it shoots straight downhill and into the Hudson River.

"It's almost like it's locked in a coffin alive and hidden in this dark, rather dingy tunnel," said Mr. Walters, a founding member of the Beczak Environmental Education Center, based in Yonkers and dedicated to teaching the public about the Hudson River.

But if city officials, developers and advocates of exposing the Saw Mill -- 20 miles long, starting in Chappaqua -- have their way, it will soon emerge from its grave, first, as part of the planned \$1.3 billion River Park Center, with its minor league baseball park, condominiums, apartments, shops and restaurants, and later with other downtown revitalization projects.

Jim Pinto, the city's director of downtown and waterfront development, said the cost of exposing the river was estimated at about \$49 million, of which \$34 million has already been provided by the state.

Much work remains, though, before the Saw Mill sees the light of day. For instance, no money has been raised yet to pay to uncover the section that flows under Larkin Plaza.

And the environmental review process is just beginning. The River Park Center's developer, Struever Fidelco Cappelli, is expected to submit a draft environmental impact statement detailing the first stage of work this month.

While some of the work is basic, other elements present intricate engineering challenges. For example, the river will have to be rechanneled so it bypasses construction.

"It's almost like a heart bypass," said Joseph V. Apicella, senior vice president of Cappelli Enterprises and the project manager. "You close off one vein and open up another."

The first phase involves 1,100 linear feet of the river, a large portion of which has remained exposed over the years, although the water can be hard to see from a distance.

"Anyplace you see trees, that's where the river is," said Mr. Pinto, as he walked the area where the River Park Center is proposed.

The sections of the river that will be uncovered or restored run under Elm Street and across New School Street, and parallel Nepperhan Avenue before turning north and west along New Main. Mr. Apicella said the river would be dammed at various points to create certain visual effects, from rapids to a meandering stream skirting sidewalk cafes, shops and other public areas.

While portions of the Saw Mill River Parkway often flood, the river rarely overflows its banks downtown. It did not happen even during this spring's northeaster.

Still, any design must provide for the changing nature of the river, which can range from nothing more than a modest stream to a raging torrent during a storm, which could be particularly hazardous at high tide, when the Hudson comes up to meet the Saw Mill at Larkin Plaza.

Steven L. Grogg, an engineer with the McLaren Engineering Group who is working on the project, said the tidal influences presented both a challenge and an opportunity. In the 800 feet of river to be exposed between Warburton Avenue and the train station, the water will need somewhere to go at high tide. He said an existing 30-foot-by-10-foot culvert nearby could offer a solution, and the creation of tidal pools could also add interesting environmental elements to the design.

Of course, no one wants to visit a river that is polluted or full of debris, so cages are being placed upstream to catch dumped items.

Environmentalists applaud the effort to uncover the Saw Mill but stress the importance of integrating the newly exposed river in a way that is environmentally sound and not overwhelmed by development around it.

"As redevelopment of our cities and waterfronts occurs, there's a tremendous opportunity to restore the ecological health of them and make them vital and exciting places for the public," said Ned Sullivan, president of Scenic Hudson, a nonprofit environmental group.

Groups are already examining how they can build on the river project to create a rich cultural, environmental and historical resource. Groundwork Yonkers, an environmental group that works to protect the Saw Mill, has already received a grant to examine the creation of an interpretive trail, said Ann-Marie Mitroff, the group's director of river programs.

Kenneth W. Dearden, a local developer and a member of the Beczak Center's board, said he would watch the progress of the river project closely.

"I want to make sure nothing falls through the cracks," he said. "Until shovels break ground, no development is ever a done deal."