

Morris towns getting funds to clean flood areas

State grants to clean Rockaway, Passaic river basins

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The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has awarded stream-cleaning grants to designed to help relieve chronic flooding along the Passaic River Basin.

The grants include \$300,000 to Montville and Parsippany, along with Boonton and East Hanover, to clean the lower Rockaway River. Parsippany — in conjunction with East Hanover, Hanover, and Florham Park — also will receive a grant of \$168,153 to clean the Whippany River.

Lincoln Park and Pequannock will receive a grant of \$150,000 to clean the chronically flood-prone East Ditch and, in conjunction with Wayne, will receive \$69,300 to clean the Pompton River.

The Rockaway, Pequannock and Pompton rivers, which flow through Morris County, are all considered tributaries of the Passaic River, which begins in Mendham and runs through much of North Jersey.

Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Parsippany) was a co-primary sponsor of a bill passed last year by the state legislature that re-prioritized an existing \$3 million pot of state funds from a 2003 bond act made available due to cost savings, project deferrals and cancellations from the previously funded Lower Saddle River Project.

The grants will be used to dredge shallow parts of rivers and streams and to de-slug clogged areas of waterways — which are problems contributing to flooding in the Passaic River Basin.

Boonton Mayor Cy Wekilsky was happy to hear about the funds, but is still unsure how much money each town will receive and what specific spots will receive the most attention.

“I hear they are focusing more on what is below the (Jersey City Reservoir) dam, and we of course are above that,” Wekilsky said. “We are still waiting to hear who gets how much.”

Wekilsky said Boonton’s concerns are along the stretch of the Rockaway River running parallel and below Main Street through Grace Lord Park, where a slope failure dating back to Hurricane Irene in 2011 caused a snag of trees and branches.

“The river is flowing pretty well right now, but they tell me down the road, there could be problems. And our recycling center is right along there, so we have to be concerned about flooding there,” Wekilsky said.

A press release from Webber's office noted that due to the re-appropriation, the bill included no new state spending and almost one-third of the \$3 million appropriation will be sent to aid towns in the 26th Legislative District for flood control.

"The legislation and grants directly heed the call for dredging and de-snagging waterways from residents of Fairfield, Lincoln Park, Montville, Parsippany and other municipalities that have suffered repetitive flooding in the Passaic River Basin," said Webber. "The dredging of shallow sections can help waterways handle the volume and force of water during torrential rains, and the clean up and removal of built-up debris can reduce overflow and bottlenecks in clogged waterways. We are cost-effectively putting existing resources into preventive measures to mitigate flooding — prioritizing a way to prevent and reduce flooding in the first place, not just putting funds into clean up after storms have ravaged communities."

Julia Somers, executive director for the Boonton-based nonprofit Highlands Coalition, also has concerns about funding de-snagging and other measures that do not address what she says is the overriding problem.

"It's great they are de-snagging, but snagging is not the basic problem with flooding," she said. "The problem is upriver, and how much water is getting into the river instead of being absorbed into the ground (due to overdevelopment). Flooding is a regional problem and this is not going to solve the problem."

"There are a whole range of macro approaches to mitigating flooding in the long-term," Webber said. "Right now, with these grants, we are dealing with the flooding issues these towns have been dealing with new for several years, and they need some relief."

Just over the Morris County border, Fairfield also will receive a grant of \$184,800 to clean the Deepavall Brook, Greenbrook and Big Peace Meadows.

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