

Passaic River regatta torpedoed by debris

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By **DENISA R. SUPERVILLE**
HERALD NEWS

RUTHERFORD -- A debris-filled river killed the regatta this year.

The seventh annual Head of the Passaic Regatta, scheduled for Sunday and expected to draw about 500 rowers from around the Northeast, was canceled earlier this week because shore-to-shore debris -- including logs, tree branches, plastic bags, tires and even a mattress -- along the Passaic River could have endangered rowers during the competition, said Marc de Mul, the regatta director.

"Because of the dry weather and the high tide, there was a lot of debris on the river," de Mul said Friday. "It makes it too hazardous to have a rowing race."

Personnel from the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners' River Restoration Program have been working since Tuesday to clear debris from the surface of the 3.2-mile raceway between North Arlington and the Nereid Boat Club in Rutherford.

This year's problem resulted from a drought and simply a lack of regular cleaning, said Bob DeVita, program manager for the River Restoration Program. The waterway is supposed to be cleaned five days a week, but the smaller of two skimmer vessels -- boats the commission uses to clean the river and the bay -- tipped over last year and is being redesigned. The area where the competition was to be held had not been cleaned since December, DeVita said Friday.

After regatta representatives contacted the commission about two weeks ago to address the debris problem, it took a week to get the larger vessel down the Passaic River because the boat had to pass through four bridges, one of which is seldom used and had to be checked, DeVita said.

About 12 tons of garbage were removed from the water recently, and workers spent 12-hour days between Tuesday and Thursday using a skimmer vessel to remove debris from the water's surface. On Friday, a few bottles, plastic bags and an occasional foam cup bobbed along the surface.

Directors of the Nereid Boat Club, which had planned to host this year's competition with the Lyndhurst-based Passaic River Rowing Association, made the decision to cancel the race on Tuesday, when it was still unclear whether the waterway would be safe for the weekend competition.

De Mul said he understood that people were disappointed.

"We don't want people to damage their boats, and we don't want people to get injured, and there was a risk of that happening. ..." he said.

"That's the last thing we want -- for people to come down here and have a bad time. That's what was going to happen."

In addition to the cadre of rowers that included high school students, organizers said 40 events had been planned. Registration fees of \$20

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to \$70 for the regatta were returned, de Mul said.

On Friday, Ridgewood resident Kevin Wennersten, who had expected to participate in two events on Sunday, said he was disappointed and angry that the competition had been canceled because of garbage on the river.

"It's unfortunate that this was allowed to occur," said Wennersten, before he zipped his rowing shell into a blue protective covering. "I understand that there are natural factors, but it's just unfortunate."

But there is the safety factor of rowers on the river.

"A lot of people have been looking forward to using this river," he added. "But they can't because it's dangerous."

Abraham Mertens of Rutherford also had planned to participate Sunday. He said more should be done to curb the littering.

"It's a wonderful river when it's clean," Mertens said. "It's just a matter of keeping it that way and enforcing to keep it clean."

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