

Suffolk County, Town of Brookhaven Partner on Forge River Parcels

Preservation of 37.6 Acres Will Protect Impacted Watershed

Moriches, NY – Joined by a contingent of environmentalists and civic leaders, including members of the Forge River Task Force, Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy and Brookhaven Town Supervisor Brian X. Foley today announced the joint acquisition of 37.6 acres of open space at the headwaters of the Forge River.

The Moriches property located on the eastern branch of the Forge River has been a focus of the county's recent acquisition efforts as the county and town seek to protect the distressed watershed of the river which flows into Moriches Bay.

The preserved properties will be used for passive recreational activities such as hiking and bird watching. The county's share of the \$4.1 million purchase price will come from the Save Open Space Farmland and Hamlet Park Fund. The land is comprised predominantly of Pitch Pine-Oak woodland habitat with open fields.

"The environmental stresses on this marine environment make acquisition of the remaining open spaces surrounding it a crucial mission," said County Executive Levy. "Preservation of these parcels is an important and critical step in the process of determining the causes of those stresses and creating a plan to mitigate them."

"I am keeping my promise to protect the Forge River watershed," said Supervisor Foley. "Protecting river corridors is one of my administration's central environmental priorities, and the Forge River watershed in particular needs special attention. By partnering with Suffolk County in open space purchases like this one, Brookhaven Town maximizes its power to preserve and protect its environmental resources."

The County Executive noted that the Town of Brookhaven has been a very willing partner in the county's preservation efforts over the last several years. Since Levy took office in January 2004, the county and town have completed ten partnership acquisitions preserving more than 420 acres at \$24.7 million, including the purchase of development rights to five farms. The county has preserved over 587 acres in Brookhaven during the same time period.

"Acquisition of the Godzieba property has never been more significant than now," said Brookhaven Town Councilwoman Carol Bissonette. "It is the first step of many towards restoring the Forge River, its lakes, tributaries and creeks. The timing couldn't have been better. This acquisition demonstrates the power of partnership between the town and the county not just in acquiring this critical open space, but equally reaffirms that partnership in the efforts of the members of the Forge River Task Force and its mission to restore the overall health of the Forge River and its surrounding properties.

Seeking to maximize partnership acquisition opportunities with the county, Levy this month recommended funding in his proposed capital budget for a new Environmental

Legacy Fund which pledges \$50 million for open space and farmland preservation and park restoration projects. Legacy Fund dollars will be leveraged by matching funds from other levels of government and private entities partnering with the county to acquire open space for a minimum of \$100 million.

The Forge River, located between the hamlets of Mastic and Moriches on the south shore, has great recreational and ecological value to the region. Historic activities, however, have adversely impacted the river, exposing it to a large number of pollutants including duck farm and sewage treatment plant discharges, septic system leachate, storm water runoff, loss of wetlands, small-lot development, and shoreline hardening. This once scenic and biologically productive environment is now marked by recurring algal blooms, water discoloration, low dissolved oxygen levels, fish and crustacean kills, and foul odors.

In response to these problems, the county's Department of Health began a monthly water quality monitoring program at twenty sites along the river corridor. A year of monitoring for parameters including nutrients, salinity, dissolved oxygen, bacteria, chlorophyll-a, and phytoplankton, is being conducted by the county to help develop the data needed to lead to a mitigation plan. Results of the samples collected to date indicate that a considerable degree of impairment exists throughout the river, particularly in its upper reaches.

The County Executive recently wrote to the State Department of Environmental Conservation urging the Upper Forge River's inclusion, along with its adjacent tributaries, to the state's list of impaired waters. Such inclusion would make the river eligible for funding under the federal Clean Water Act to facilitate restoration efforts.

"Restoring the Forge River and acquiring property in an around the area are important components to protecting this watershed and is just a part of the county's commitment to safeguarding the river corridors and the wetland systems all along the south shore," Levy said.

"The Nature Conservancy applauds the county and the town for this important strategic acquisition," said Sarah G. Newkirk, Coastal Program Director for The Nature Conservancy. "Acquisitions like this one recognize the ecological sensitivity of the watershed, and the importance of rivers as the primary component of the land-sea interface. High quality coastal waters are of inestimable value to Long Islanders, and this acquisition will help promote this shared value and the recreational and environmental resources that depend on it."

"The county and town's commitment to preserving and restoring the Forge River is extremely gratifying to those of us who love and appreciate the river's beauty and importance to the area," said Ron Lupski, president of the not-for-profit group *Save the Forge River, Inc.* "If we are ever to see the Forge River restored to health, it will take a multi-tiered effort from all levels of government working together with the community."



DOWN BY THE RIVER

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