

MIDDLETOWN

Clean water getting help from nature

Wetlands projects are intended to reduce contamination.

By Matt Sheley
Daily News staff

Work on new artificial wetlands on the Aquidneck Avenue side of Gaudet Middle School and on Newport Avenue near the intersection with Ellery Avenue recently wrapped up, the latest efforts by the town of Middletown to clean up stormwater runoff.

The wetlands are designed to let runoff filter through them before flowing into the Bailey Brook watershed. The brook is one of the main sources of drinking water on Aquidneck Island.

It is the first time the town has created strategically placed wetlands to capture and clean stormwater runoff, Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown said.

"As a best management practice, it helps slow the water down and decreases the bacteria and contamination load, which helps our drinking water supply," he said.

The work is part of the town's multi-million-dollar campaign to improve water quality and reduce the number of summer swimming bans at Atlantic Beach and Easton's Beach in Newport.

"This is consistent with our approach to focus on upstream mitigation and find 'green' solutions to help the cause," Brown said. "Besides getting the job done, aesthetically it makes sense because it's all natural and not concrete and relatively low maintenance."

Since 2004, the town has invested more than \$14 million in its aging stormwater and sanitary sewer networks. The two systems function independently of one another, but have been targeted as contributors to contamination that causes periodic swimming bans at area beaches.

Besides upgrading its infrastructure, the town has taken a number of other



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This wetland area in front of Gaudet Middle School in Middletown is one of two that have been created with the goal of helping to reduce contamination in stormwater runoff.

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steps, including conducting house-to-house inspections for illegal tie-ins to the system, approving new regulations governing restaurants and other high-volume users and undertaking an educational campaign to make people more aware of how they affect the system.

Last week, the state Coastal Resources Management Council awarded a permit to the town for its Esplanade stormwater diffuser project, the first of its kind in the state. Stormwater from that area will be routed about 100 yards offshore and into a natural mixing zone in Easton's Bay, allowing bacteria to dissipate before it reaches the shoreline. Work by C.B. Utilities in Bristol on that \$3 million-plus project is expected to start within a week, officials said.

In early September, the Town Council awarded an \$87,103 contract to create the artificial wetlands to All Island Landscape of Portsmouth, the lowest of three bidders. More than \$65,000 in grant money covered all but 25 percent of the total project cost, officials said.

Edward Collins, facilities director for the Middletown school system, said the wetlands projects were positive, both for the town and for the school district.

Gaudet Middle School Principal Michael Mancieri said the wetlands project was a welcome addition to the area, where other projects have been undertaken by students and staff in recent years.

"This area has numerous trees, shrubs and a pond," Mancieri said. Members of the school's Green Team, led by seventh-grade social studies teacher Richard Taylor, "have been working to restore it as a fully native habitat. They take out any growth that is nonnative and replace it with native species."

"The goal is to create an original New England woodland area complete with a walking path," he said. "The thought would be to use this area as an outdoor educational area."

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