

Saccarappa Dam

Westbrook purchases 2 parcels along Presumpscot River to increase public access to downtown

Eric Russell, Portland Press Herald, Maine
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Apr. 7—The city of Westbrook has purchased two parcels of land along the Presumpscot River that it plans to use to increase public access to the waterfront and its growing downtown.

The first parcel extends for two-thirds of a mile along the northern shore of the river from the Bridge Street bridge to a railroad bridge west of Cumberland Street. It previously was home to an electric utility line that connected the hydropower station to the Sappi North American paper mill.

The second parcel is the entirety of 1.75-acre Saccarappa Island, which sits west of Bridge Street and is surrounded by the river. It comes with an easement that allows for the operation and maintenance of a fish ladder.

The two pieces of land were purchased for \$350,000 with two major donations — \$250,000 from Westbrook Environmental Improvement Corporation and \$100,000 from the Cornelia Warren Community Association.

City officials plan to keep the parcels undeveloped and use them to improve public access along the river, including construction of a riverfront trail. There is already a trail on the southern shore. There are no specific reuse plans for the island property.

The purchases were a negotiated condition of a settlement agreement first reached in 2016 that led Sappi to remove the dam and hydroelectric power station at Saccarappa Falls.

At the time, the nonprofit Friends of the Presumpscot River hailed the agreement as a win for environmental stewardship because it would restore fish passage and wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities.

"It's almost an unheard-of opportunity to have in the most densely urban part of the state ... a natural riverway," said Michael Shaughnessy, the group's president.

Two other conservation groups, however, the Friends of Sebago Lake and the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, opposed the agreement and even appealed to the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, unsuccessfully.

Federal regulators finally gave final approval in 2019 for the dam's removal, which allowed water to flow freely over Upper Saccarappa Falls for the first time in centuries.

Westbrook has seen significant development and investment in its downtown over the last few years, especially in the area along the river's southern shore. The city's population in 2020 was just over 20,000, and it was the fastest-growing city in Maine between the 2010 and 2020 U.S. Census.