

Dance Festival 'Celebrates' the Housatonic

By JONATHAN P. TURNER

The Housatonic River, long considered one of Litchfield County's most important natural assets, is getting a lot of attention lately, and the newest effort involves a river "celebration," proposed by the Massachusetts-based Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival.

Jacob's Pillow plans to "celebrate" the river and the towns around it by embarking on a yearlong "exploration" project, beginning in the fall of 1992. Members of the Becket, Mass.-based dance company and the HVA discussed the project this week at meetings in Lee, Mass., and New Milford.

Though specific plans and activities have yet to be finalized, Jacob's Pillow has commissioned a choreographer from Bennington College in Vermont to create activities for the wide-ranging project, which will likely include art projects, historic tours, nature hikes and canoe excursions.

Besides the Jacob's Pillow project, the seven-town Housatonic River Commission is putting together uniform land-use regulations for towns along the river. And, the state Department of Environmental Protection and the General Electric Company held another informational meeting in Bridgewater last night to update the status of a long-standing effort to clean up PCB [polychlorinated biphenyl] contamination in the Housatonic, which stems from the General Electric plant in Pittsfield, Mass.

Meanwhile, the Cornwall-based Housatonic Valley Association is considering creating a "river watch" position to monitor current and proposed development along the river and its watershed, and the HVA is also looking into proposing a "riverbelt" program to protect land along the entire stretch of the river.

The HVA, according to its director of environmental programs Lynn Werner, is also excited about the Jacob's Pillow plan. "There's never been a project like this; it's very exciting," she said. "Right now, it's very fluid and creative. It's a way to raise people's awareness of the river by getting people involved in projects celebrating the river and the role it has played over the years.

"It will draw from traditional river groups like recreational outfits, land trusts and river commissions; but it also draws from untraditional river groups like industry and artists," Ms. Werner said. "We hope different river perspectives will work together to create more cooperation, understanding and appreciation for the river.

"Getting people involved who don't think of themselves as river advocates—that's the uniqueness of it and ultimately its strength," Ms. Werner added.

The Housatonic originates just east of Pittsfield, Mass., and flows south for 132 miles to its mouth at Stratford on Long Island Sound. Jacob's Pillow—an internationally known festival, dance school and artistic community founded 60 years ago—is based on 155 acres in Becket, close to a branch of the Farmington River, which winds through northeastern Litchfield County and east towards Hartford.

However, Jacob's Pillow executive director Sam Miller lives in Great Barrington, Mass., on the Housatonic, and he is the former manager of Pilobolus, the Washington-based dance troupe. His love for the Housatonic provided the genesis for the project, Mr. Miller said.

"I think there's a gap between the work we support and the communities in which we live and work," he said this week. "I want to bring two things together with this: support for community work in protecting the river and the notion that the Housatonic River is a neighborhood we all share from Dalton to Stratford."

Mr. Miller said that by recognizing and linking the work of town residents, businesses and artists along the entire river, current partnerships may be strengthened and future connections may be forged.

"In Lee, we had somebody speak who spends time improving just 100 feet of the river and another who likes to canoe from the river source to the mouth," he said. "Both of them are the same in a way; to care very deeply about 100 feet is caring about the whole thing."

"We want to work with as many artists along the river as possible," Mr. Miller said. "They are the leadership; we respond to them. We have never done this kind of thing as an arts organization, but this is nothing new to individual artists," especially those from other countries.

He added that the venture may also benefit Jacob's Pillow by broadening the company's identity and its purpose "in relation to its own community."

"We are often asked to speak out on national issues like censorship and AIDS, but this is important because it's localized," Mr. Miller said. "It's the notion of 'think globally, act locally.' We're dealing with watershed issues in restoring our own property and I realize the fact that watershed issues don't stop at your property line."

Susan Sgorbati, dean of faculty at Bennington College and choreographer for the project, recounts having done outdoor "site-specific" dance work, but never on a project of this nature or scope.

"I have strong feelings about protecting the environment and I'm very interested in the Housatonic River project," she said. "I have two ideas so far—one is a tour of nine sites on the river, with various performances; and also the idea of collecting objects from sites that can be shared with people down the river."

While there may be some events actually in the river, Ms. Sgorbati explained that performances may take place in schools, theaters and churches along the river. Of the Housatonic, she commented, "It's a miracle of nature that is not only there for its beauty, but its potential for recreation and to help sustain people."

Northeast Utilities operates five hydroelectric facilities on the river, capable of generating over 125,000 kilowatts of electricity at any one time. Industrialized development characterizes several spots along the northern and southern ends of the river, while Litchfield County's 41-mile segment of the river has faced most of its development threats in New Milford and Canaan. Candlewood Lake, the state's largest manmade lake, is sustained by water pumped from the Housatonic.

"It's such a microcosm of our culture," Ms. Sgorbati said. "You have very wealthy towns and poor communities; there's a Native American community and then there's the Kent School. People take for granted that it's there," she said of the river. "But it won't just be there if we're not careful. We also want to get input from the public about what they'd like to see happen."

"I'm in favor of anything which helps the river and its environment," said Philip Hart, a member of the Housatonic River Commission, which monitors river use and development and advises towns on building proposals. The panel covers New Milford, Kent, Cornwall, Sharon, Falls Village, Canaan and Salisbury. The HVA monitors the entire river.

"It sounds like a fairly original idea," Mr. Hart said of the Jacob's Pillow proposal. "It sounds really interesting. There is a lot of need for leadership in river protection. The ultimate consequences of overdevelopment aren't as evident up here as they are south of here, so people may not think of [the Housatonic] as much as they should."

"People have used the river as a dump for so long, they have turned their backs on the river," said Sally Spillane, president of the Lakeville-based Berkshire-Litchfield Environmental Council, which has members from both Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Projects like the Jacob's Pillow plan are "very important to turn people toward the river," she said. "My feeling is it's easy to only see the problems of your state."

"But if you live 20 miles downstream, what someone does upstream affects that," Ms. Sgorbati said.

Ms. Werner said that the Jacob's Pillow project may serve as an impetus to bolster existing river protection regulations and create a larger local and state effort to make sure that development of land works "with nature and not against it."

"Coming up with uniform land-use standards is very complex and time consuming," she said. The exploration project is "what they feel is special about the river and that provides an atmosphere for future protection. I see this as setting the stage in a way."

The HVA is investigating current and potential land uses along the river to see if towns would benefit from establishing a "riverbelt" to protect the river from certain kinds of intrusions. Eric Shiffman, a member of a New York-based flyfishing group, has suggested that the Housatonic would also benefit from having a "riverkeeper" to discourage approval of development that might harm the river.

The Housatonic "is lucky in a way because there are a lot of groups along the river who are concerned about their piece of the river," Ms. Werner said. "But the different personalities of the river from north to south keep these people separate."

"We'd like to set up a river watch or citizen's watch to link these groups together and provide them with access to direct services and enable the river to have a much stronger advocacy in the environmental decision-making process," she said. "Too many times, we're just responding to calls people have about the river. We want to be more proactive."

All of these projects will complement each other, and more definite goals must be articulated before the respective projects can become reality, according to those interviewed.

"It's a tremendous undertaking," Ms. Werner added. "But if we could pull all these resources together, boy, we'd really have something."