

New year, same problem

Overcrowding concerns in Manchester high schools continue

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It's difficult to predict an outcome when it comes to the Manchester-Hooksett high school contract situation.

On the one hand, Hooksett has formally notified Manchester it believes it is in breach of contract because many high school classes exceed 30 students. On the other hand, the Manchester school board is reportedly working with a proposed policy that would restrict class sizes to 30 students.

Then, according to a Union Leader article, Manchester Mayor Ted Gatsas recently pointed out Hooksett is supposed to send all of its high school students to Manchester, with exceptions only on a case-by-case basis. Since a fair number of Hooksett students are going to other public high schools, Gatsas is insinuating that perhaps Hooksett

is in breach of contract too.

Hooksett is trying to get a resolution sooner rather than later. The Hooksett school board voted last week to make another attempt to negotiate a mutual agreement for early release from the contract. The board will also try to schedule a meeting with the Manchester school board to discuss the situation—the board tried that previously, but legal counsel in Manchester advised the school board not to meet with Hooksett, since Hooksett had formally declared the contract in breach.

Hooksett still owes Manchester millions of dollars in capital money as part of their contract agreement, which is tied to school renovations in Manchester several years ago. Meanwhile, Manchester would lose several million dollars if Hooksett pulled out all its students.

David Pearl, vice chairman of the Hooksett school board, said the district still has a

three-pronged approach to the issue: negotiate early release from the contract, hold joint meetings with Manchester officials to discuss issues, and go through the legal process of declaring the contract breach.

“To me, the filing of breach does not mean we cannot have a discussion with Manchester,” Pearl said, noting he hadn't heard Hooksett's counsel suggest otherwise.

In that sense, it's up to Manchester officials to change their minds about meeting with Hooksett. The Hooksett school board also instructed Superintendent Charles Littlefield to gather more information on class sizes in Manchester.

Based on a recent meeting with Candia, which also sends its high school students to Manchester and which has also expressed concern over classroom sizes, Pearl said it appears the city has made progress reducing class sizes, though many still have more than 30 students. Pearl noted the contract

with Hooksett reads that all Manchester high schools must maintain class sizes according to state standards, which limit high school classes to 30 students. At the beginning of the school year some high school classrooms exceeded 40 students.

With another budget season on the way, school officials in Hooksett will continue to pay close attention to how the budget process turns out in Manchester. So far, Superintendent of Schools Thomas Brennan has presented two budget options, one tied to the city's spending cap and another that would restore some of the teachers lost during budget cuts last year.

“I think the issues with Manchester have been financial, not the quality of the teachers, educators, administrators, but a lack of funding,” Pearl said. “We're waiting to see what happens.”

Make way for brook trout

NH Rivers Council pushing restoration of McQuesten Brook in Manchester

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For a long time, McQuesten Pond in Manchester was sort of out of sight, out of mind, said Jane Beaulieu, chairwoman of the Manchester Conservation Commission.

“Most people just think it's a mosquito-infested swamp,” she said.

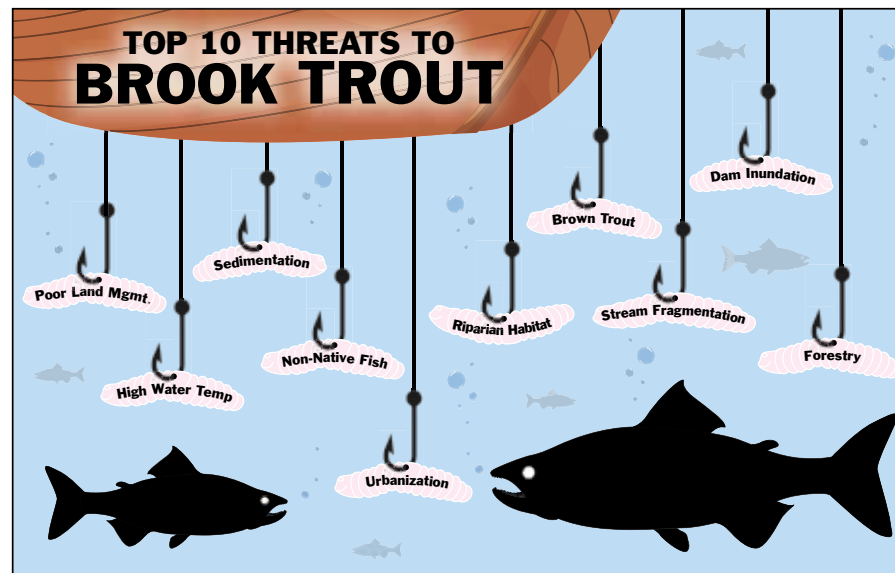
Beaulieu pointed at two overgrown dams in McQuesten Pond last week. As she pointed, about 100 ducks, crowded into a relatively small section of open water, turned and quacked onto the ice, their webbed feet slipping and slapping. The ducks, undoubtedly looking for handouts, approached en masse. If the two dams were removed, ducks would need to find a different patch of open water, and that's OK with environmental officials.

If things go as planned, the full restoration of McQuesten Pond and McQuesten Brook will be about making way for eastern brook trout, rather than making way for ducklings.

“We can probably think about this as a new and terrific place for you to get back in touch with nature and fish, a shady place to go in the heat of the summer,” said Michele Tremblay, president of the New Hampshire Rivers Council.

That's the long-term vision for the pond and the brook, which are located off Second Street in Manchester.

“I get discouraged when I see people give up on urban places,” Tremblay said.



Statistics from the report: Eastern Brook Trout "Status and Threats," conducted by Trout Unlimited for the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture

“When you look at how few natural places exist in a place like Manchester, we should be focusing more on restoring and keeping them.”

At the heart of the proposed restoration efforts is the eastern brook trout. Wild eastern brook trout typically grow to 6 to 8 inches in length and can be held in the palm of your hand. Once widespread in New England, wild brook trout are extremely rare today, typically only found in clean, well-oxygenated mountain streams and deep, clean northern lakes and ponds. (New Hampshire Fish and Game stocks waterbodies throughout the state with brook

trout, brown trout and rainbow trout from state hatcheries for anglers.)

That's why it was so surprising New Hampshire Fish and Game was able to verify the presence of wild eastern brook trout a few years ago in McQuesten Brook. The fish weren't just living and reproducing there; they were thriving. They still are, but conditions in the brook are clouding the trout's future, Fish and Game officials said. The brook is dammed in three places, including the two dams in the pond, which is on the state's list of impaired waters.

McQuesten Brook begins in agricultural land in Bedford and flows through residen-

tial sections in Bedford, into Manchester near Second Street. Ultimately, it dives beneath the Everett Turnpike and into the Merrimack River.

Steve Landry, Merrimack watershed supervisor with the state Department of Environmental Services, said the sheer population density of brook trout rivals that of streams in the North Country.

The New Hampshire Rivers Council caught wind of the situation and took action. The plan now is to fully restore the waterway, which includes dam removal, decreasing the amount of impervious surface (pavement), making sure culverts are big enough, removing invasive species, trash removal, and pollution remediation. The plan is to turn the waterway into the thriving stream system it once was. Full restoration could take 10 or 15 years, but some of the restoration pieces, including the dam removal, could take decidedly less time. Landry figured the project was about two years out from construction.

The project has a slew of partners, including DES, Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited and Anheuser-Busch, with the Rivers Council driving the boat. Comprehensive Environmental, an environmental consulting firm, has provided the Rivers Council with a list of recommendations for restoring the stream.

“The main focus in the watershed is really about managing stormwater runoff,” Landry said, adding stormwater runoff delivers excessive sediment into the stream,



McQuesten Pond will be restored to a babbling brook. Courtesy photo.

flows in times of heavy rainfall. Landry had heard that a fitness center located on Second Street had previously experienced flooding from the pond.

As part of the long-term project, officials will also look at replacing some of the undersized culverts along the stream's route. That includes a 36-inch culvert in Bedford and a 48-inch culvert in Manchester. The average width of the stream should be about 12 feet, Landry said.

The stream goes under South Main Street and emerges through a dilapidated 66-inch culvert that is split in four places. The culvert can back up water flow, and the stream has outflanked the culvert on one side, eroding banks and causing mature trees to fall. The culvert has backed up with lawn clippings, trash and saplings, as well as the occasional tire.

"It appears to be serving no purpose other than to mess up the channel," Landry said.

Anheuser-Busch holds a river cleanup each year, where its employees take a morning off to tackle trash and debris along the river. It was during one of the first cleanups that officials began to realize McQuesten Brook might be a special place, Tremblay said. A daughter of a volunteer pulled a dead adult brook trout out from the area of the crumbling culvert. Biologists determined the fish became trapped behind the culvert and eventually died from a lack of oxygen. Volunteers found five dead trout.

The public education piece of the puzzle is a big one. Rivers Council staff expect to meet with residents and business owners to educate them about how their own behaviors can impact the watershed, said Beth Flagler, who has been managing the project for the Rivers Council. Flagler said she expects to survey residents and business owners once the weather warms.

"We're trying to inspire people to think about it as a little community there," Tremblay said, adding many people never expected the stream to connect an urbanized section of Manchester with Bedford.

Tremblay remembered going to GoldenRod Drive-in Restaurant in Manchester as a kid. When people ordered takeout, patrons would have the option of choosing dining room, takeout or "lake," referring to Lake Massabesic. People would often take their food to go and drive over to the lake to eat. Tremblay has the same type of hope for McQuesten Brook. Perhaps patrons at Clam King will opt to take their meals to the brook.

Beaulieu shares a similar vision for the pond. She remembered her father, a former mayor of Manchester, taking her as a child to McQuesten Pond to birdwatch. Once the restoration is complete, she said, she hopes the stream becomes a destination. 🐾

destroying trout habitat.

Landry said some sections of the brook's watershed are nearly 80 percent impervious, with the entire subwatershed averaging 33 percent impervious cover. Once the percentage gets greater than 10 percent, watersheds tend to start experiencing runoff issues, Landry said.

All that pavement heats up in summer time, and when it rains, the pavement heats up the rainwater before it flows into the brook, raising the brook's temperature and sucking out oxygen along the way. That is still a big stressor on brook trout populations, Tremblay said. Tackling the run-off could involve decreasing pavement, establishing some plantings, or installing rain barrels.

Brook trout can't survive when water temperature exceeds 68 degrees. Other warmwater species, such as bass and pickerel, do just fine in warmer waters, but not trout. A combination of factors has helped keep the brook cold enough. Despite the heavily urbanized area, the stream is well-shaded, so much so that many people don't know it exists. Secondly, the brook is fed by a cold spring.

Ironically, a long section of the stream is flowing through an underground pipe, which shades the water from the harsh summer sun, allowing it to stay cool. Typically, environmentalists don't want to see streams in pipes, but in this case, the pipe is inadvertently helping out trout, officials said.

The pond portion of the brook does not have enough dissolved oxygen to support a healthy fishery. Removing the dams would get the water and the oxygen moving again. Removing the dams could help alleviate flooding since the waterway over-



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