

Exeter River Report to the General Court 1995

Note: This document has been edited from its original form.

Prepared by
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I. Introduction

The Exeter River is located in southeastern New Hampshire. The river begins in Chester, New Hampshire and flows east and north to the town of Exeter where it becomes tidal and changes name to the Squamscott River before emptying into the Great Bay. The Exeter River flows for a total of approximately 32 river miles before becoming the Squamscott River. The Exeter River has been nominated by the Rockingham Land Trust and the Exeter River Watershed Association for designation into the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program. The Exeter River has been evaluated by the Department of Environmental Services and is being recommended for designation.

The Rivers Management and Protection Act was passed by the General Court in 1988. The Act states in part: "It is the policy of the state to ensure the continued viability of New Hampshire rivers as valued economic and social assets for the benefit of present and future generations. The state shall encourage and assist in the development of river corridor management plans and regulate the quantity and quality of instream flow along certain protected rivers or segments of rivers to conserve and protect outstanding characteristics including recreational, fisheries, wildlife, environmental, cultural, historical, archeological, scientific, ecological, aesthetic, community significance, agricultural, and public water supply so that these valued characteristics shall endure as part of the river uses to be enjoyed by New Hampshire people."

The Act directs the Department of Environmental Services to receive and evaluate nominations for the designation of rivers or river segments to protect outstanding values and characteristics under the Rivers Management and Protection Program. Nominations approved by the Commissioner must be forwarded to the next session of the General Court for review and approval.

In fulfillment of this statutory directive, the nomination of the Exeter River is hereby forwarded to the General Court. The Department of Environmental Services recommends that the Exeter River be designated into the Rivers Management and Protection Program and be classified as a "rural river" under the provisions of the protection measures in RSA Chapter 483. The outstanding statewide and local resource values and characteristics which qualify the Exeter River for designation are described in this report.

II. The Exeter River Nomination

A. Description

The Exeter River nomination begins at the crossing of Route 102 in Chester and flows for approximately 32 miles through the communities of Sandown, Danville, Fremont, Raymond, Brentwood and Exeter. The Exeter/Squamscott drainage basin encompasses an area of 126.2 square miles. From its headwaters in the Town of Chester, at an elevation of 400 feet, the Exeter River drops at a gradual slope of about 12 feet per mile to the Town of Exeter. Along the way, the river often doubles back on itself and passes through several short stretches of rapids in the Town of Brentwood.

Land use along the Exeter River is primarily rural. In the upper reaches of the river, through the towns of Chester, Sandown and Danville, there are scattered farms and single family homes and the riverbank is well forested and interspersed with large areas of wetlands. In the lower reaches of the river, from Fremont to Exeter, there is more industrial and commercial land use. The river corridor in this area is characterized by a mix of forests, wetlands, and residential, institutional and commercial development. Most of the manmade modifications in this area are well-screened from the river by a buffer of trees.

B. River Values and Characteristics

The Rivers Management and Protection Act (RSA Chapter 483) lists nine river values and characteristics which may qualify a river for designation into the program. The Exeter River supports many of these natural, managed, cultural, and recreational resource values and characteristics at a level of either statewide or local significance. The resource values which qualify the Exeter River for designation include wildlife, fish and plant resources; water quality; open space; scenic values; water withdrawals; wastewater discharges; historic and archeological resources; community resources; and recreational resources.

1. Natural Resources

a. **Wildlife and Plant Resources:** The Exeter River supports a diverse habitat of wetlands, forest and open fields that is home to a variety of wildlife and plant species. The river corridor connects large forested tracts of land in Chester, Raymond, Fremont and Brentwood with the downstream Great Bay ecosystem. As a tributary to the Great Bay National Estuarine Reserve, the Exeter River plays an important role in maintaining the overall health of the bay's environment. The river supports a number of endangered and threatened bird species including the federally-listed bald eagle which is known to winter at the Great Bay and believed to forage in the river. An osprey nest at nearby Chapman's Landing is one of only two known nests in southern New Hampshire. Like the bald eagle, this state-threatened species is thought to rely on the river habitat for food and shelter. The New Hampshire Natural Heritage Inventory lists six endangered or threatened plant species and the threatened great blue heron as occurring along the Exeter River.

b. **Fishery Resources:** The Exeter River is both a cold and warm water fishery that provides habitat for approximately 17 resident species. Naturally-reproducing species include small and large mouth bass, brown bullhead, chain pickerel, american eel, yellow perch and sunfish. The river is stocked annually with brown, brook and rainbow trout and shad by the New Hampshire

Fish and Game Department. There is an ongoing anadromous fish restoration effort for river herring and shad and the river serves as spawning area for alewife, blueback herring and shad. Fish ladders at Pickpocket Dam and Great Dam enable anadromous fish to reach upstream spawning and nursery habitat.

c. Water Quality: The Exeter River has been designated a Class B water by the General Court. The river is currently fully supporting the standards of this water quality goal. The significance of improving and maintaining a high level of water quality in the Exeter River is evidenced by the use of the river as the primary source of municipal water supply for the Town of Exeter and its important link to the Great Bay National Estuarine Reserve.

d. Scenic Values: Broad wetlands, forested riverbanks, and gently-flowing waters, interrupted by short stretches of rapids and falls, combine to make the Exeter River an important scenic resource. From the river, few signs of development are visible and there are excellent views of the large wetland areas in Sandown and Fremont. Scenic views of the river are afforded from a number of bridge crossings particularly at Pickpocket Dam and in the center of Brentwood.

2. Cultural Resources

a. Historic and Archaeological Resources: There are a number of sites of historic interest along the Exeter River. Many buildings in the area were constructed before or during the early 1700s and there are numerous Indian and colonial archeological sites. In Exeter, there is a local historic district that is listed in the national register. The Exeter Historic District is significant for its maritime history and early settlement. Several houses in Fremont are also eligible for national listing.

b. Community Resource: The importance of the Exeter River as a community resource is reflected in the local planning and protection efforts of the communities along the river. Several adjacent towns have ongoing river corridor planning or protection efforts. The towns of Exeter and Brentwood have adopted local shoreland protection ordinances that include a 150-foot setback from the Exeter River. The river has special community importance for the Town of Exeter which uses the river as its drinking water supply.

3. Recreational Resources

a. Boating: The generally free-flowing nature of the Exeter River provides excellent flat water and quick water boating opportunities for canoes and kayaks. Whitewater boating is limited to high water conditions. A 5-mile stretch above Fremont has been described in an AMC boating guide as ". . . the finest on the river for scenery . . . and probably the best quick water in the Piscataqua Watershed." Public and informal launching areas found at bridge crossings provide canoe and kayak access to the river. Motorized boating opportunities are generally limited to deeper areas of the river behind the Great Dam in Exeter. This stretch of the river is accessible from a municipally-owned boat ramp located at Gilman Park in Exeter.

b. Fishing: Trout fishing is very popular in the upper reaches of the Exeter River especially in the vicinity of traditional stocking points. While stocking sites may vary from year to year, the river is stocked annually with brook, brown and rainbow trout as well as shad.

c. Other Recreation: Swimming, hiking, bird watching and camping are other recreational activities that people enjoy on or near to the Exeter River. The Town of Exeter owns conservation land and a public park adjacent to the river. The conservation land provides access to the river for canoeing as well as opportunities for hiking and fishing. The public park includes a picnic area, ball fields and a boat ramp. In Sandown and Fremont, an abandoned railroad bed, owned by the State of New Hampshire, provides multiple-use recreational opportunities. There are a number of privately-owned campgrounds located next to the river that have facilities for seasonal camping, including one which offers canoe rentals. Hiking, jogging, and skiing opportunities are available on a trail system through a tree farm owned and maintained by Phillips Exeter Academy that has several miles of frontage along the Exeter River.

4. Managed Resources

a. Impoundments: There are nine active dams on the main stem of the Exeter River that impound water for a variety of purposes including storage, recreation and hydroelectric power production. Two of these dams are owned by the Town of Exeter which controls one for public water supply purposes and the other for recreation. Two other dams on the river are also maintained for recreational purposes. An operating hydroelectric facility located at one of the remaining dams provides power for about 25 homes.

b. Water Withdrawals: The major water withdrawals from the Exeter River are used for municipal water supply and institutional use. The Exeter River is the source of municipal water supply for the Town of Exeter and also provides irrigation and heating water for Phillips Exeter Academy. Both withdrawals are of more than 20,000 gallons per day and are registered with the Department of Environmental Services.

c. Wastewater Discharges: There is one facility that has been granted a permit from the Department of Environmental Services to discharge wastewater to the Exeter River. Phillips Exeter Academy discharges ice rink coolant water to Little Brook just upstream of its confluence with the Exeter River.

III. Local Support

Local support for the designation of the Exeter River into the Rivers Management and Protection Program is strong. Beginning in September of 1993, the Exeter River Watershed Association and the Rockingham Land Trust held a series of informational meetings and public workshops about the proposed nomination. Letters were written to the riparian landowners, local planning boards, conservation commissions and selectmen in each of the towns along the Exeter River notifying them of the plan for its nomination into the program and inviting them to the meetings. Notices were placed in local newspapers and posted throughout the watershed. The response was excellent. The first informational meeting, held on September 9, 1993, was attended by 51 people. Twenty-seven people attended a second informational meeting held on June 1, 1994. Support for the nomination at both meetings was very positive. Many of those who attended actively participated in development of the nomination at one or more of five public workshops held between September and June.

On behalf of the sponsors, a senior planner from the Rockingham Planning Commission met with planning boards and conservation commissions in each of the towns along the Exeter River to discuss the nomination. Meetings were also held with local selectmen to determine the level of

local support for the nomination. A total of ten letters of support were received from all but two of the towns along the river. There were no letters of opposition. Seven additional endorsements came from area individuals and organizations, including a petition with the signatures of 30 landowners who abut the river in Fremont. At the public hearing on the nomination, which was held in Brentwood on September 21, 1994, the comments were overwhelmingly supportive and all who testified spoke in favor of the nomination.

IV. Summary and Recommendations

The Exeter River supports a variety of significant state and local resources. To better protect and manage these resources, the Department of Environmental Services recommends the following actions:

Recommendation 1: The General Court should adopt legislation which designates the Exeter River into the Rivers Management and Protection Program and classifies the Exeter River as a "rural river" from its headwaters at the NH Route 102 bridge crossing in Chester 32 miles to the base of the Great Dam in Exeter.

Under the provisions of the protection measures in RSA Chapter 483, a rural designation will provide increased protection for the river against new dam construction, damaging channel alterations, water quality impairment, and the siting of solid waste facilities in the river corridor. A designation will also require the establishment of protected instream flow levels to maintain the minimum amount of water in the river that is necessary to safeguard public trust resources, including water quality, fisheries, recreation and scenic values. A Local River Management Advisory Committee will be established to coordinate local issues related to the protection and management of the river and will provide residents with a direct avenue for formal input into state decisions that affect the river. Finally, a designation will result in the development of a long-range management plan for the river that coordinates state planning and management of fisheries, water quality and quantity, and recreation.

A "rural river" classification is recommended for the entire Exeter River. Under RSA Chapter 483, rural rivers are defined as "those rivers or segments adjacent to lands which are partially or predominantly used for agriculture, forest management and dispersed or clustered residential development. Some instream structures may exist, including low dams, diversion works and other minor modifications." Although some individuals recommended either rural-community or community classification for the segment of the river in downtown Exeter, the overwhelming majority of the Exeter River is clearly rural in character and the Department and the Rivers Management Advisory Committee have determined that the river and its corridor best meet the definition of a rural river.

The designation of the Exeter River as a "rural river" under the Rivers Management and Protection Program will clearly express the intent of the General Court with regard to the protection and management of the river and will focus attention on the river as a natural resource of both statewide and local significance. This attention will help to insure greater scrutiny of plans or proposals which have the potential to significantly alter or destroy those river values and characteristics which qualify the Exeter River for designation.

Recommendation 2: The towns of Chester, Sandown, Danville, Fremont, Raymond, Brentwood, and Exeter should continue to work toward the protection of the Exeter River through the adoption and implementation of local river corridor management plans.

While a state designation will improve the protection and management of the river itself, continuing local efforts will be needed to address the use and conservation of the river corridor. A growing recognition by local citizens of the Exeter River's valuable contribution to the overall quality of life in their communities is evidenced by their desire to see it designated into the state program. Citizen appreciation and concern for the river should be reflected in the decisions and actions of local officials. The Department of Environmental Services will provide technical assistance to the local river management advisory committee and local officials in the bordering towns on the development of local river corridor management plans, including comprehensive shoreland protections ordinances.

In summary, the establishment of a clear policy and specific instream protection measures by the General Court, and a continuing commitment on the part of local governments and residents to protect and manage the river corridor through sound land use decisions will ensure that the outstanding resources of the Exeter River will "endure as part of the river uses to be enjoyed by New Hampshire people."