

# HEROES OF THE SAW MILL RIVER

## MaryJane Shimsky

*Question: Let's start with you telling us a little bit about yourself. When did you first get involved in public service?*

**MaryJane Shimsky:** I am a Westchester County legislator. I first took office at the end of February 2011. Before that, I was involved in various issue groups generally involving land use policy. I was also a vice chair of the County Democratic committee. After I took office, I resigned from party offices and my primary responsibilities after that were as an elected official. My husband and I and our then not quite one year old son moved to Hastings-on-Hudson in October of 1995. Starting



Westchester County Legislator MaryJane Shimsky took office in 2011. A Hastings-On-Hudson resident since 1995, she was already familiar with the Saw Mill River and the flooding issues affecting the surrounding neighborhoods.

with the first big Nor'easter in April of 2007, flooding definitely became a problem for us and for a lot of people in our neighborhood. In 2011, which was my first year in office, was a particularly wet year and the community was suffering a great deal from flooding problems, especially the people downhill from me who lived closer to the river. During the Spring and the

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early summer, the flooding was becoming a once-every-two-week event. I knew that something was coming out of balance, and it probably had to do with climate change because we were getting more frequent and more severe precipitation events. Legislation had

been passed by the board shortly before I joined the Board of Legislators, allowing for the creation of storm water advisory boards. I looked at the legislation and it was a little vague on how the advisory boards for the individual watersheds would be formed. I took kind of a Hamiltonian view of government and I said, ‘This doesn't say I can't do it,’ so I and my aides at the time, Ellen Hendrix and Joy Haber, reached out and got in touch with all the municipalities along the river. We had our first meeting in July of 2011 and basically everyone at that point had the same complaint: that the flooding was getting worse and there had not been any major cleanup of the river for essentially living memory. Things were backing up. Things were flooding.

We were able to take FEMA money, which was directed toward the area from hurricanes Irene and Lee, and in the winter of 2011-2012 the river essentially started to get cleaned up. I think they had gotten out a total of about 300 trucks filled with woody debris from the river, and at that point things started working a lot better along the river because our flooding has not been that bad since. Once we got the debris out of the way and people could actually see the river

**“...the flooding was getting worse and there had not been any major cleanup of the river for essentially living memory.”** when they were walking along the South County Trail or bicycling along the trail, or even driving down the highway, we discovered a really great place to enjoy nature, to hang out a little bit and ever since then our group has become aligned with the Saw Mill River

Coalition and Groundwork Hudson Valley. It's been great to see all of the volunteer work that's been done.

*Question: Do you remember what it looked like walking along the river prior to the 2011 cleanup?*

**MaryJane Shimsky:** Because of the invasive vines tangling with the debris, you couldn't even see that there was a river in a lot of places. And of course, people are less inclined to take care of things that they can't see. So once that all got removed and people could see the river and the river actually became part of the landscape as you were walking or bicycling along the trail, it really gave people a bigger sense of ownership.

The Saw Mill River, once we finally got to see it, was a river environment in miniature. I think one of the impacts of the cleanup was to help call people's attention to the fact that there was a river under all of that and that it was a valued part of the lives of people who lived in the area. It's made people want to take care of it, and it's definitely increased the desire for environmental stewardship.

**“People are less inclined to take care of things they can't see.”**

*Question: Why do you think local communities should take an interest in small river streams?*

**MaryJane Shimsky:** They provide opportunities for residents to get out for recreation. You think you have to drive up 40 miles to really get into nature - well you don't. You just have to go right down to a trail, walk a few yards off, sit on a bench and look and see what's going on. I think that's very important because it makes nature a part of people's daily lives. I also think that for some people who don't have the ability to get away, it may be their only real exposure to that kind of environment. With the high school kids from Yonkers, you see how much pride

they take in it and how happy they seem when they're working out there. It's up to communities to provide those opportunities for their people. It's definitely the role of government, as well, to make sure that the human needs for recreation and connection with nature are taken care of. If you've got problems in the river, they are probably affecting everything in your community, all the other ecological systems and the human systems as well. So, it's important to stay in touch with nature because if you don't, you are going to be surprised by the problems as they arise. If you are there and you are actually part of the river environment and you keep an eye on it, you're going to know when things in the environment and in your communities as a whole, your county as a whole, your state as a whole are getting better or when they're getting worse.

*Question: What is your vision of the Saw Mill River going forward? How do you see the community and the government interacting in the future?*

**MaryJane Shimsky:** Certainly, in terms of infrastructure, there's an obvious symbiotic relationship there. I think with the cleanup you saw that, but if you're talking about larger projects, the daylighting of the Saw Mill River in the city of Yonkers provides a perfect example. The piping underneath was not working in terms of stormwater management and the people of the area were being deprived of seeing their river. The park down in the area where the phase one of daylighting took place is such a necessary bit of green space and natural environment in a section of community that really had none. The community really got involved. There is fabulous artwork down there; the beautiful mosaic was done by a local artist. There are places to sit and enjoy lunch. As a piece of stormwater management infrastructure, it certainly works a lot better. You've got more water capacity than you had when you're trying to stuff everything through a pipe which ended up half full of debris anyway. Having the schools involved with the river and being able to use such things for programming for their students is actually a wonderful thing. Making sure that we take advantage of the river as a recreational resource - putting in the benches, putting in the birdhouses, putting out informational signage to engage people in the area whether they're walking, skating or bicycling, is really great because it makes them value the river more. If people can see the river, then they understand it and how it makes them feel. Being in nature makes people calmer and happier and that's a service that the river can provide. If you want to save the river, giving people a sense of ownership and a sense that it can be a very important part of their lives will help us because it will make people that much more desirous of saving it.