

Meeting Regarding Better Informing the Public of Safety Precautions for Swimming at the Huntington Gorge

June 29, 2022

In attendance: Josh Arneson, Richmond Town Manager; Michael Chiarella, Director of Richmond Rescue; Jim Feinson, Richmond Land Trust; Denis Gile, Richmond Fire Chief; Gerald Levesque, Richmond Assistant Fire Chief.

Purpose

The general purpose of this meeting was to review what is currently being done to inform the public about safety issues related to swimming in the Huntington Gorge and what more could be done. The gorge is owned by the Richmond Land Trust.

Jim Feinson from the Richmond Land Trust noted the following is currently in place:

- Sign owned by the State that informs of the potential for death when swimming at the gorge. This sign lists dates and names of those that have died while swimming at the gorge.
- Signs in the parking lot on the upper gorge
- Last year signs were placed along the river's edge. These signs are planned to be reinstalled soon for this summer.
- The Vermont River Conservancy has a steward program for the gorge. The stewards main job is greeting people, addressing people who are out of order, and asking people to keep the area clean. However, there may be an increased focus on communicating the dangers associated with swimming at the gorge to the public.

Warning System

- The group discussed if an official warning system could be put in place to inform the public of when unsafe conditions exist. There were concerns that this would need to be set up with objective criteria to be met before a warning is issued. There were concerns if a warning did not go out on a certain day and there was an injury or death would there be liability to the Town or the Richmond Land Trust. A warning system did not seem feasible at this time and without much more research on how to properly establish such a system.

Message Delivery

- Front Porch Forum
- Outreach to local media to generate stories on local media outlets
- Postings at area colleges
- Post at the gorge about other swimming holes in the area that may be safer
- It was noted that a lot of people come from out of state so signage at the site may be the best option to reach the most visitors.

Sign that Shows Deaths at the Gorge

- Sign has not been updated since the 1990's so people may read the sign and assume that the issue has been resolved since there are no recent deaths, when in fact many deaths have occurred between the last death recorded on the sign and present. Perhaps there could be someone from Richmond to champion updating this sign and work through that process with the State.

Guidance from other Communities with similar issues

- Could we reach out to other communities in Vermont or the New England / New York region to see if there are any practices in place that have helped improve safety as similarly dangerous swimming areas.
- Feinson is going to reach out to Steve Livey from the Vermont River Conservancy to see if he is aware of programs in other communities that Richmond could consider.

Video on River Safety

- We may be able to obtain a video on river safety in general. A QR code to this video could be provided on signs at the site to encourage visitors to watch the video and educate themselves before swimming.

Enforcement

- Explore what could be done by the police to have more of a presence at the Gorge. Could police enforce open container violations and thereby have more of a presence at the gorge and also curb drinking in general at the gorge, which may help prevent unsafe choices by visitors.