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# City hosts Huron River Day, discusses chemical contamination

by Michal Ruprecht  
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The City of Ann Arbor hosted the 39th Huron River Day Sunday afternoon at Gallup Park. The event is hosted every year to celebrate the city's main water source and to educate the public about the importance of environmental preservation and water quality. According to a city [press release](#), the event draws about 2,500 people from the community.

The event was open to everyone and featured discounted boat rentals, children's activities, river exhibits, music and food. Tours to Washtenaw County's Parker Mill County Park were also offered. Ann Arbor Mayor Christopher Taylor began the event with a speech about the importance of the river.

"We here in Ann Arbor, of course, love environmentalism and the outdoors and recreation," Taylor said. "These are things that are really at our core ... at the bottom of the valley of all these things is naturally the Huron River. It's our defining piece of beauty in our community, and it's something that we all treasure. We treasure it for all sorts of reasons. Obviously, for its beauty and its recreation, for the regeneration that it provides, but it's also, of course, the source of ... 85 percent of our drinking water, and it's a truly beautiful thing. Ann Arbor would be vastly different and far lesser were it not for the river."

Taylor was followed by Laura Rubin, executive director of the Huron River Watershed Council. Rubin began by describing the work of the council and the state of the river.

“The Watershed Council has been around for over 50 years, protecting and restoring the watershed for healthy and vibrant communities,” Rubin said. “The watershed’s in pretty good shape. We have a pretty clean urban river, and part of that is that we have a lot of natural areas that help protect it. We have strong park systems; we have strong natural areas that help filter and take up a lot of the rain water and clean it.”

Rubin also addressed the increasing concern Ann Arbor residents have about dioxane and PFAS contamination in Washtenaw County’s drinking water. She said PFAS was found more than five years ago and has been in commercial production for over 25 years. She added the community became more aware of PFAS when the state **issued** a “Do Not Eat” Fish Advisory for the river last August because of high levels of the harmful chemical. She said the levels since have decreased and it’s safe for recreation and bodily contact.

“We’ve been able to put on new carbon filters that filter out the PFAS before it hits the Huron River,” Rubin said. “Since those filters have been in, the levels of PFAS in our watershed and in the river have been going down. Additionally, if you live in the city of Ann Arbor or some of the surrounding townships, and you get your drinking water from the Huron River, the city of Ann Arbor has upped their amount of filters so that now all of the drinking water is going through these carbon filters and the numbers of PFAS in our drinking water are safe.”

Rubin also talked about the dioxane levels, which she said is not as much of an issue because the **dioxane plume** hasn’t reached the river. She said she wants to educate the public about the issue, but it won’t affect the event. Rubin added the council is working to intervene in the **lawsuit** against those responsible for the contamination.

“The Watershed Council has been working with the city and the county and Scio Township to intervene in the lawsuit and try to get faster and more thorough cleanup of that site,” Rubin said. “(We’ll) also (get) a better understanding of how the plume is moving so that we can try to prevent it from reaching the river.”

Lastly, Rubin spoke about Ypsilanti City Council’s recent **decision** to remove the Peninsular Dam, which would reconnect 1.6 miles of the Huron River.

“There’s still a long way to go in terms of securing funding and removing it,” Rubin said. “Eventually that will improve the water quality in our river. We’ll start to see more diversity of fish ... that area has one of the only self-reproducing walleye populations in southeast Michigan. So, we’ll see better fish; we’ll see more oxygen in the water, more biodiversity, and, hopefully, it will really revitalize the riverfront there.”

Although PFAS and dioxane levels continue to be a concern for residents, Cheryl Saam, city recreation supervisor for the canoe liveries, said the chemical contamination has only minimally affected the event. She added there was great turnout despite the predicted thunderstorms.

“I feel like it will not have a big impact because ... the language is pretty clear that river recreation is OK and skin contact and such, and we’re going to put up some more signs and alter the signs of touching the foam,” Saam said. “I hope it doesn’t affect our river recreation much. I think we’ll get lots of questions, yeah, and I hope people will care about the river, that they love the river, they come up paddling and everyone will become passionate about keeping the river clean.”

Ann Arbor resident Alyssa Benson said she isn’t worried about the chemical contamination because Rubin’s speech reassured her. She added attending the event is a family tradition.

“We came here today because this is just a really nice event for my family, and we came last year and it’s nice to kayak in the river,” Benson said. “Any event here I try to make it to. I really support it ... It’s awesome to bring the kids out here.”

Rackham student Harry Richman agreed, saying he has attended the event before and enjoys kayaking in the river. He added he hopes to attend the event again next year.

Although some residents are still concerned over the chemical contamination, Rubin emphasized PFAS levels have decreased after action was taken by the city. She added there is more work to be done and she said she hopes the event educated residents about the importance of environmental preservation.

“There’s more to do on PFAS,” Rubin said. “The best thing that we can do is prevent these chemicals from being used in the first place, but we also know that we still need to get it out of some of the legacy pollutants in the groundwater where it is right now.”