

http://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/ci_29793105/stockbridge-mans-cross-state-canoe-journey-ends-call

Stockbridge man's cross-state canoe journey ends with call on GE to clean Housatonic River

By Andy Metzger

State House News Service

POSTED: 04/20/2016 08:52:38 PM EDT

BOSTON >> Paddling a canoe across Massachusetts with a message for the state's most prized new corporate arrival to clean up the Housatonic River, an environmentalist on Wednesday said he had seen improvements to the Bay State's waterways over the past three decades.

Wearing a backward camouflage cap and a life preserver on the Charles River Esplanade, Denny Alsop read talking points he had scrawled on his wooden paddle about the surprise he felt learning that General Electric was moving its headquarters to Boston while so much cleanup work remains undone around the company's old manufacturing facilities in Pittsfield.

Alsop's compatriot Tim Gray, director of the Housatonic River Initiative, summed it up thusly: "We wanted to make a statement to Boston: You guys are getting the money, we guys are getting the shaft."

Upon his arrival in Boston after paddling across the state in a canoe, Alsop shouted "Heal the Housatonic" to supporters that gathered to greet him on the Charles River shoreline. Alsop, a 69-year-old Stockbridge man who completed a similar canoe trip across Massachusetts in 1988, said the two GE news items surprised and "worried" him. After a press conference on the manicured banks of the Charles, near the Hatch Shell, Alsop visited the site of GE's future headquarters, where he read a letter to the company from the Berkshire Natural Resources Council urging the clean up of the Housatonic.

Alsop described the visit to the South Boston Seaport site as a "quiet finale."

In early April when city and state officials gathered in an office tower to welcome GE to Massachusetts, the company's CEO, Jeff Immelt, defended its cleanup efforts, saying no other company had done as much underwater dredging as GE.

"We have just completed a huge dredging project on the Hudson River. We've spent a half a billion dollars on the first project on the Housatonic. It's our intention to work well with the governor and with the EPA and do another successful project on the Housatonic," said Immelt, who allowed that company officials had their own opinions about how best to undertake cleanup work. He said, "We've done more dredging than any other company on earth I'd have to say."

Gray said GE has had to perform so much cleanup work because it created so much pollution and didn't dispute that the company leads the world in dredging.

"That's probably true because they polluted more rivers in the world to dredge, so they got themselves into this," Gray told reporters. Gray said the polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, polluting the Housatonic were used as a lubricant in transformers built by GE and the hazardous chemical now follows the river to Long Island Sound, where it harms fish. The chemical also wafts off the water along the way, according to the Lee resident.

"We breathe them in," said Gray. He said, "I live 200 feet from the river, so when I'm sitting on my deck, I'm taking in PCBs."

Gray said GE performed a "marvel of engineering" in cleaning up two miles of the river and said he hoped additional remediation would involve treating the contaminated dredged earth rather than merely dumping it near the river.

In a statement, General Electric said it is "committed to a substantial Housatonic Rest of River Remedial Action" and, "It is not a matter of if GE will undertake a cleanup, but a matter of how it will be done."

GE was offered \$120 million in spending programs from the state and \$25 million in property tax relief from Boston as part of the enticement to lure the global manufacturing and technology company to the region. In February, Gov. Charlie Baker said GE's disagreement with the Environmental Protection Agency over a federal remedy plan for its old site is a "separate issue" from the headquarters move.

After the press event Wednesday, Alsop and Gray visited the future GE headquarters, with Alsop symbolically reading aloud an acid letter to Immelt penned by Tad Ames, president of Berkshire Natural Resources Council.

Playing on GE's "imagination at work" slogan, Ames harkened to days when the Housatonic River would have been "a glorious river to swim, and harvest fish for Friday supper."

"Think about what that must have been like," Ames said. "It provided food, clean water and fertile soil in the floodplain. Unfortunately for Berkshire County and all those downstream, General Electric dumped massive quantities of PCBs in the river. While GE grew, the 'river beyond the mountain place' died."

He added, "You have the power of advanced tools for cleaning up the mess that was left behind, and you have the resources to get the job done right. The strategy of corporate delay and fear is transparent and continues to hurt those who have suffered the most. Instead of pouring money into attorneys that fight the Environmental Protection Agency, pour it into cleaning up the river to meet their specifications. That is what the 'World's Best CEO' would do."

Before portaging over land to the Charles River, Alsop covered some 250 miles along the Housatonic, Westfield, Connecticut, Chicopee, Quaboag, French, Blackstone, Quinsigamond, Assabet and Sudbury rivers, he said. Gray said he had greeted Alsop along the way, and said Alsop paddled through the snow, rain and freezing cold.

Alsop completed a similar journey in 1988, constructing a canoe out of a pine tree on a friend's property in Tyringham for the trip, which he recently refurbished — patching a hole, cleaning off barn swallow droppings and adding a fresh coat of white paint — for his voyage that ended Wednesday.

The character of the rivers changed in those three decades from litter-strewn afterthoughts to gems, which are today filled with more boats and cleaner water, Alsop said.

"Rivers were places that people didn't love. Everywhere I looked I saw chain-linked fences and no-trespassing signs and shopping carts thrown off bridges," Alsop said of his earlier trip. He said of his recent trip, "The chain-link fencing is gone. The no-trespassing is gone. Steps leading down to the river, and real poetry — people setting up little chairs and fishing spots, and none of that was there before."

Alsop said his earlier canoe trip was a "spear point" for the 1996 River Protection Act, which restricted development near waterways.

The signing of the river protection law included a stunt of higher visibility and shorter duration than Alsop's monthlong trip.

Right after signing the law, Gov. William Weld and the bill's chief sponsor, Sen. Robert Durand, dove head-first and fully clothed into the Charles River, treading water before wading to shore.

Staff writer Phil Demers contributed to this report.