



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
October 15, 2007

CONTACT:
Greg Williams, 207-669-2457

Presumpscot River Watershed Golf Courses Getting Greener

PORTLAND – Riverside Municipal Golf Course, a 250-acre parcel of rolling green hills located on the banks of the Presumpscot River, is on its way to getting even greener. Last week, course superintendent Gene Pierotti was one of several area golf course managers to meet with representatives from an international organization that offers guidance and, ultimately certification, for choosing environmentally friendly practices. For golf courses, this often means planting buffers along streams, conserving water, and cutting back on the application of toxic chemicals to minimize their impacts on water bodies. By taking this step, Pierotti and his colleagues have put their courses on the road to being green-certified.

During an afternoon site visit last Wednesday, Pierotti surveyed the grounds with Joellen Zeh and Jim Sluiter of Audubon International, based in Albany, NY. The organization certifies golf courses all over the world as part of its Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program (ACSP), one of several programs they operate to protect the environment. A primary goal of the program is to “enhance the valuable natural areas and wildlife habitats that golf courses provide, improve efficiency, and minimize potentially harmful impacts of golf operations,” states the website. Audubon has certified 550 golf courses in the US, and approximately 2,000 are currently working toward certification.

According to Zeh, Riverside is well on its way to getting certified through the program. “They’re doing a really great job here,” she said.

The site visit was one of six to area golf courses this week which are funded by a US EPA Targeted Watershed grant managed by the Casco Bay Estuary Partnership (CBEP) and Presumpscot River Watershed Coalition, says Matt Craig, CBEP Program Coordinator. In 2005, the two organizations together received a grant totaling nearly \$740,000 to continue their efforts to protect and improve the Presumpscot River. One of the tasks assigned through the EPA grant was working with area golf courses to make their operations more environmentally sound. To do so, CBEP has looked to the expertise of Forrest Bell, a Portland-based environmental consultant and head of Presumpscot River Watch, a Coalition member.

Currently, there is only one certified golf course in Maine: Portland Country Club. But other area courses are interested and were also scheduled for a site visit this week by Audubon International. They are Falmouth Country Club, Sable Oaks Golf Club in South Portland, Val Halla Golf and Recreation Center in Cumberland, and Sunset Ridge Golf Course and Rivermeadow Golf Course in Westbrook.

“The hope is to get all of these courses off and running,” Zeh said.

According to Zeh, golf courses that attain certification through Audubon’s program end up being “light years ahead” of conventional courses that do not incorporate the same environmental safeguards into their daily operations. Zeh said the most visual of those safeguards are buffer zones along waterways, though to be certified a course must meet Audubon’s standards in the following categories: wildlife and habitat management, chemical use reduction and safety, water conservation, water quality management, and outreach and education.

For the past year, Bell has been helping Pierotti make adjustments to the way he manages the grounds to begin meeting those environmental standards. Pierotti said Bell first contacted him in 2004, soon after he had become superintendent, and ever since then he has been “bugging and bugging me...I said ‘I’ll do whatever you want. Just tell me.’” Pierotti clearly enjoys and takes pride in his work and teaming up with Bell to get Audubon certification has given him one more thing to feel good about.

“I think it is great,” Pierotti said. “My primary concern is to protect the business of the game, but this is such a huge facility there is room for both.” If he succeeds, he will have made Riverside the first green-certified municipal golf course in Maine.

During the site visit, Zeh and Sluiter inspected several key locations, including facilities used for washing equipment, storing chemicals such as fungicides and herbicides, and fueling up golf carts. They also toured new buffer zones along the Presumpscot River and a tributary cutting through the course that Pierotti and Bell began working on last fall. In these areas, the two men have planted maple and pine saplings and have let the grass grow high in 10- to 20-foot swaths along the waterways. In one section of the tributary, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection has conducted an inventory of macroinvertebrates to see what aquatic life it supports.

Zeh had several initial recommendations for Pierotti and Bell, including that they start testing water quality where the tributary enters and exits the course to determine nutrient levels. The testing, she said, will provide a “snapshot” of conditions and “let us know of any red flags.” She also urged Pierotti to make improvements at the course’s fueling station, which should have an impermeable pad beneath it and a roof above it, but currently has neither.

Typically, the first step for a golf course seeking certification, Zeh said, is the completion of a site assessment and environmental plan. For Riverside, that will primarily require documentation of what Pierotti and Bell are already doing. “They’re off to a great start,” she said at the end of the visit.

To learn more about Audubon International’s Cooperative Sanctuary Program for golf courses, visit their website at www.auduboninternational.org, or contact Matt Craig at 207-228-8359, or Forrest Bell at 207-650-7597.