

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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### **Saving the “Whale”**

More and more motorists are driving cars with the Massachusetts license plate that displays a frolicking whale along with the plate number. These licenses fund the Environmental Trust Fund, and money collected from their purchase is earmarked for conservation efforts. I commend the drivers who buy them, but I have wondered if these drivers know that the conservation projects their fees are supporting are limited to the coastal waters of the Commonwealth.

The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission first brought this deficiency to my attention, and I joined their efforts to broaden the uses of license plate receipts. Our efforts paid off when the legislature passed an open space bond last week. This is the background of the Environmental Trust and the reasons it took an act of the legislature to expand its mission to the Connecticut River valley.

The Trust was formed as a result of a lawsuit, and its first donation came from the settlement of a case involving pollution of seawater. That money was appropriately dedicated to coastal waters, and the enabling legislation so described the uses of the fund. Expenditures would be limited to bay areas and the freshwater streams and rivers that feed into the sea.

Western Massachusetts became interested in the fund when it became the ongoing recipient of funds from sale of license plates. Pioneer Valley planners tried in two ways to provide for our own environmental needs. First came the idea of our own environmental trust. Licenses decorated with a brown spotted trout would broadcast the interest of Western Massachusetts drivers to saving our freshwater streams. Handicapped by the requirement of new seed money, a second bureaucracy and the creation of yet another distinct license plate, the bill did not gain broad support. The second alternative became the winning idea. That required us to revisit the law that created the Environmental Trust Fund in the first place.

With the passage of last week’s legislation we altered the definition of acceptable uses for receipts, authorizing the Trust to address needs throughout the Commonwealth. A state agency selects the project and approves educational programs that will be funded by the Trust. The application process for motorists remains the same, but the result is different. From this time forward, when you pay the \$20 annual surcharge (a two year license costs \$70), you are helping clean up regional rivers as well as Cape Cod Bay.

Cars with environmental license plates seem to be increasing each month. I like to see the playful flip of the whale’s tail displayed on cars around town and on the Turnpike. Yet I have previously had a nagging thought, wondering if motorists are aware that our own rivers do not benefit from the display of concern about our waterways. Today I am happy to report that the Environmental Trust Fund is a blanket that covers all Massachusetts drivers -- no matter where they live.