



*Rochester Committee
for Scientific Information
Rochester, NY*

*RCSI Bulletin 4
Hearing on Irondequoit Creek*

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May 1965*

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ROCHESTER COMMITTEE FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION

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NEWSLETTER

Volume 1 Number 6

Hearing on Irondequoit Creek

Irondequoit Creek, Allen Creek, and other streams feeding into Irondequoit Bay may be upgraded, as a result of a public hearing held on May 12 at the Rochester Academy of Medicine. The hearing was called by the New York State Water Resources Commission, which has the authority to assign standards of purity and quality to state waters. Director A. F. Dappert (Bureau of Water Resource Services of the Commission) was the Hearing Officer, and Mr. Reilly was Counsel for the State.

The request for upgrading portions of the creeks from grade D or lower (fit for agricultural and industrial use) to grade B (fit for fishing and recreation) was based on evidence, that the character of the watershed has changed completely. At the time of the last classification in 1957 the area was farmland with some industries. Presently it is residential with a growing number of public parks. Other evidence was brought forward that the current ratings fostered health hazards and depressed property values.

Numerous witnesses appeared in favor of the change, and the hearing lasted past midnight. Mr. Dan Miller, representing the home owners of the Oak Manor tract, gave a scholarly presentation of the health hazards carried by polluted creeks. (The Oak Manor subdivision bore the brunt of the gross pollution of the creek last summer). Representatives of the town of Brighton (Mr. Laird) and town of Webster (Mr. Bradley) said that their towns seek to obtain the highest purity for public waters, and reject the policy of putting out as much pollution as the towns can get away with. Webster has committed 15 million dollars to a program of construction of treatment plants and sewers, which will safeguard the Webster beaches. Mr. Laird, a professional in this field, indicated that towns in the Irondequoit Creek basin may have to form a central planning district for sewage disposal, in order to keep the creek at the necessary level of purity. Representatives of Perinton and Penfield strongly favored the upgrading. Mr. Woodhead of the Monroe County Water Authority showed how the pollution from creeks and from the Bay reaches the intake of drinking water, and Mr. Greiner of the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences showed the ecological damage of pollution to fish and wildlife in Irondequoit Bay. Assemblyman Conham (first Assembly District, Monroe County) pledged his support to the proposals for upgrading and spoke of state subsidies for that purpose.

Witnesses favoring the upgrading of the Irondequoit watershed were cross-examined by Mr. Reilly as counsel for the State. A moment of high tension was reached late in the proceedings, when Mr. Reilly was charged from the floor with abandoning his job of impartial advisor, and with using all his skill to block the change in creek ratings. Mr. Reilly responded that he acted to protect the official record.

Few witnesses opposed a uniform B rating for the Irondequoit watershed. Mr. Springhart (City of Rochester Sewage Treatment Plant) spoke of the millions of dollars that have to be spent by many industries and by the City of Rochester when creeks are upgraded. On cross examination by Mr.

Harris, Mr. Springhart did not name one industry that would be seriously affected by the proposed upgrading of Irondequoit Creek, and further indicated that the overflow sewer system of the City of Rochester was just as far in violation of the present creek ratings as it would be of the new ratings. Dr. Ames (Monroe County Department of Health) spoke of the need to keep the water ratings unchanged to help industrial and community planning, and warned that stiffer standards may curb housing expansions. He suggested that we were confusing a failure to enforce existing standards with a need for new standards, and also said that his office had succeeded in abating all the twenty one sources of unlawful pollution of Irondequoit Creek by voluntary compliance without undue publicity. On cross-examination, Dr. Ames indicated that there is no evidence of any damage to health from existing pollution in local waters. Mr. Steinfeld of the Monroe County Professional Engineering Society supported the goals of conservation of public waters in principle, but spoke at length of the difficulties of upgrading the existing sewage disposal plants to meet B classification goals for the creek. By far the most knowledgeable witness was Mr. Mt. Pleasant, Assistant Sanitary Engineer for the New York Department of Health, who made and published a thorough study of the Irondequoit Creek watershed in 1962. Mr. Mt. Pleasant said that the bulk of the pollution in 1962 came from violations of existing standards for Irondequoit Creek by municipalities and by industry. On cross examination, Mr. Reilly (for the state) tried to get Mr. Mt. Pleasant to agree that the creek could assimilate grade D sewage effluent at East Rochester and cleanse itself to a recreational grade B stream in Ellison Park. Mr. Harris challenged this contention quoting the R.C.S.I. report of 1965 (Third Report on Water Pollution, Rochester Committee for Scientific Information, 1965) which said that the creek is not self-cleansing at this time. Mr. Mt. Pleasant explained that he could not settle this argument on the basis of the 1962 survey, but that in his opinion all effluent from sewage disposal plants into creeks should be chlorinated. Such chlorination is not required under C and D ratings, but is required under a B rating.

Mr. Harris, representing the Water Pollution Committee of the Monroe County Conservation Council marshalled the group. He requested new ratings for the Irondequoit Creek watershed, introduced maps and movies in evidence, brought forth expert witness (including a representative of the R.C.S.I.) and acted as counsel for petitioners in cross examination.

At the end of the meeting, Director Dappert explained that the material he regarded as relevant under the law would be presented to the Water Resources Commission. Action may be expected in approximately half a year.

(Special Report for R.C.S.I.
by George Berg)