



Photos by Michael P. Farrell / Times Union

Wilma Elliott, a volunteer with Friends of the Woodlawn Preserve, carries a piece of wood found by divers removing debris in the Woodlawn Preserve pond Saturday in Schenectady. Elliott's group is working to restore and promote the 135-acre pine barren preserve.

# Divers dredge debris from pond

*Cleanup effort at Woodlawn Preserve in Schenectady part of work to restore the site*

By Claire Hughes

Schenectady

A bathtub, bicycle, four car tires and what looked like a refrigerator part were dragged from a pond in the Woodlawn Preserve on Saturday by divers who volunteered to clean up the water.

Those larger pieces of plunder were added to the bags of beverage cans, Styrofoam cups and other debris that a dozen divers spent two hours scouring from the pond, part of a 135-acre parcel of pine barrens that neighbors have recently rallied to restore and promote.

"This is a hidden gem that nobody knew about a couple of years ago," said Spero Zoulas, 43, who has lived on nearby Kings Road for eight years.



Divers Gary "Doc" Melius, foreground, and Maggie Dehart bring up some of the debris they pulled up from the pond at Woodlawn Preserve in Schenectady on Saturday. They were among a group of divers who volunteered to help clean up the pond.

are among the wildlife commonly spotted, in addition to plenty of bird species, said Mark Townsend.

Now that the pond is free of garbage, plans include eventually stocking it with bass and perch and promoting it as a fishing site, as it once had been known

behind Saturday's "debris dive." Formation of the nonprofit a year ago revived an effort begun by physician and environmentalist John VanDeLoo that lost momentum with his death in 2007, said Janet Chen, who leads the group.

The preserve, part of the same ecosys

# DIVERS

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in Schenectady, with sections in Niskayuna, Colonie and Rotterdam. Though few area residents seem aware of it, all-terrain vehicle enthusiasts frequent the site and often leave garbage, Chen said. FWP hopes to get the site cleaned up and promote it for "gentler" recreational use, with signs informing users about its history — the pine bush was formed by a glacial lake — and how to treat it with respect, she said.

A \$5,000 grant from Lowe's will allow the group to purchase trail markers and plant a garden of native vegetation at Woodlawn Elementary School, adjacent to the preserve, Chen said.

Joyce Whitson, 69, was



Michael P. Farrell / Times Union

among neighbors who collected garbage with her 11-year-old grandson Nabil Nuhu on Saturday from the site surrounding the pond. Though she's lived in Schenectady 27 years, she'd never been to the site before.

"I've been hearing about Woodlawn Preserve for years and years and years," she said.

Divers from the Capital Region and the Hudson

Valley are a friendly group that gets together for other volunteer underwater clean-ups in places like Lake George. Neighborhood resident Louis Grasso reached out to Woodlawn native Mike Rogan, now a Colonie resident and part-time professional diver, who pulled the crew together. Air, equipment and transportation support came from Seguin's

In the foreground are some of the items found by divers looking for debris in the Woodlawn Preserve pond on Saturday.

Scuba Center in Colonie and Dive Master Services of Kingston.

Diver Matt Bogert from Kingston has travelled to the Caribbean for clean-up dives, but is just as happy to get in a murky pond on a chilly day.

"I'll dive in a puddle," he said. "It's trying to do what's right for our waters — not just the oceans, but our local waters."

Data about what the divers collected Saturday will be sent to Project Aware, an initiative that mobilizes divers to rescue polluted waterways, Rogan said.

"I think it was worthwhile," he said after exiting the water an hour or two earlier than anticipated. "It's not as dirty as we expected."

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## Pond

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with Matthew, also 11, was visibly excited as he walked along the pond in search of garbage.

"Because if it gets in the water, it can kill the fish if there's anything toxic in it," he said. "And it's just not nice to litter."

Saturday's cleanup was a coordinated effort of the Friends of the Woodlawn Preserve and Rogscuba of Schenectady and part of Project AWARE's global Dive Against Debris endeavor. It was the first cleanup of its kind at the pond, and organizers expected to find a lot.

The pond was built in 1973 to control flooding in the Woodlawn neighborhood but also is the headwaters of the Lisha Kill, said Janet Chen, chairwoman of the nonprofit Friends group.



PATRICK DODSON/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

**Above:** Divers Maggie Dehart and Gary Melius collect debris during a Woodlawn Preserve pond Dive Against Debris cleanup in Schenectady on Saturday. **Right:** Volunteers check the haul, which included tires, a bike, a tub and part of a refrigerator. See a photo gallery at [dailygazette.com](http://dailygazette.com).

"I don't think anybody's ever really gone in there before to see what kind of junk there is," she said. "There's a big ATV problem in here, and

they fish a lot in here, so who knows what kind of junk is in here. There was, at one time, old cars in the pond."

Divers spent two hours in



## SCHENECTADY

# 'A bit of everything' in pond

## Assortment of junk fished out during Woodlawn Preserve dive

BY NED CAMPBELL  
Gazette Reporter

Sean LeBlanc, 11, wore no rubber gloves as he approached the pond at Woodlawn Preserve to pick up trash.

Neither did his friend, Matthew Akerson — though Matthew did bring a rubber basketball.

Susan Baker, a volunteer, thanked the boys for coming and told them to be careful about what they picked up. Sean wasn't too worried.

"Nothing's too nasty for my hands," said Sean, whose father taught him to fish in the preserve's pond when he was 3. Both boys live in the Wood-

lawn neighborhood.

About 20 volunteers scoured the preserve Saturday in search of garbage while 13 volunteer scuba divers pulled trash, tires and other treasures from the pond.

Sean, who still fishes there

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Volunteers carry a bathtub found during the Woodlawn Preserve pond cleanup in Schenectady on Saturday.

PATRICK DODSON/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

the water and found, among other things, empty bottles, fishing lines, an oar, five tires, pieces of a refrigerator and a bathtub — which they floated to the shore using buoys. It all added up to about 200 pounds.

Baker, of Niskayuna, was happiest about the tires. She started a contest to see who could guess how many tires would be found, with the winner receiving a Friends of the Woodlawn Preserve baseball cap. Guesses ranged from zero to 200.

Baker didn't venture a guess, but that didn't stop her from shouting "I got a tire!" across

the pond while a diver brought one to the surface.

"I feel vindicated," she said.

Minutes before, she carried two chunks of rusted metal found by a diver.

"Looks like part of a refrigerator. I don't know," she said. "I'm hoping they're going to find a tire."

### CHUNKS OF A FRIDGE

For Cole Denning, 30, who also grew up fishing on the pond, the chunks of metal were all too familiar.

"This was the refrigerator," said Denning, a member of the

Woodlawn Neighborhood Association. "This used to be intact."

Draped in scuba gear, Gary Melius of Ravena bobbed up and down in the water, holding a green net filled with junk.

"A little bit of everything," the industrial electrician said of his findings. "Bottles, cans, Styrofoam cups, a fish trap."

Bobbing beside him, Maggie Dehart pulled what turned out to be a chair frame out of the water and placed it on her shoulders.

"What's this?" asked Dehart, a registered nurse who traded scrubs for a wetsuit to dive Saturday. "I don't think this can fit in your bag."

The cleanup was one piece of the Friends' efforts to promote and improve the preserve since forming a little over two years ago. Over the past year, the group purchased 95 jersey barriers and installed them around the 135-acre preserve in an effort to keep ATVs out. The nonprofit group has also applied for a state Department of Environment Conservation permit to release fish into the pond and plans to build a handicap-accessible fishing dock.

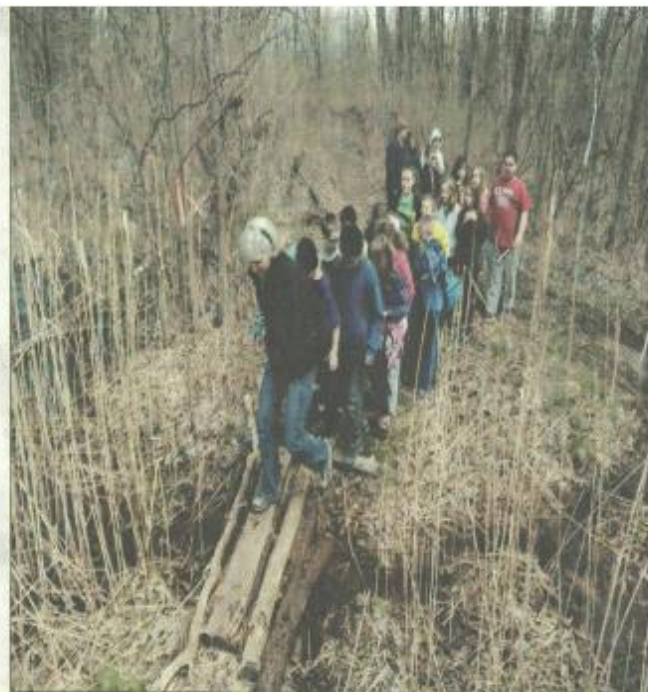
As the scuba divers entered their second hour of searching Saturday, Denning just smiled.

"It's pretty neat to see that," he said. "It's a first for the preserve."

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**WOODLAWN PRESERVE AND THE EFFORTS OF THE WOODLAWN COMMUNITY  
MAKES THE NEWS IN THE SCHENECTADY GAZETTE**



MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

**Above:** Woodlawn Elementary fourth-grade teacher Barbara LeBarron leads the way on the walking trails around school grounds on Friday. **Below:** LeBarron and students look at an aerial map at the school's new kiosk.



MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

Woodlawn Elementary fourth-grade teacher Barbara LeBarron asks students questions relating to seasonal changes, animal studies and habitat diversity on the walking trails around school grounds on Friday.

**SCHENECTADY**

# Buying back the past

## Tax foreclosures offer new hope for Woodlawn Preserve

BY KATHLEEN MOORE  
Gazette Reporter

The Woodlawn Preserve is looking more and more like the ancient Pine Bush it once was.

The City Council has seized many properties in the Pine Bush that were privately owned by people who didn't pay taxes on the land. The council is now considering abandoning the network of "streets" in the preserve, none existed in reality, but they're all on official maps as streets to be built when the land was developed.

Years ago, the council decided the land should never be developed, but they couldn't get rid of the paper streets because it would deprive owners of access to their land if they ever built there.



Now that the land officially belongs to the city — taken in last year's tax foreclosures — officials can change the maps and show one large parcel of green space.

The Friends of the Woodlawn Preserve is also reinvigorated, and members plan to replant authentic vegetation in the preserve, which has been badly damaged by all-terrain vehicles.

Even students have gotten in on the action. At Woodlawn Elementary School, they study the ecology of the unusual area, which has sand dunes and vegetation that thrive through fire, among other unusual traits. But much of that vegetation has been choked out by invasive plants native to the rest of the Capital Region.

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# Preserve

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Now, the Friends group is going to plant gardens at the preserve entrance behind the school, so students can see the vegetation that is supposed to grow in the preserve. It will start with wild lupine, a flower that nourishes the Karner Blue butterfly. The preserve used to be home to thousands of those distinctive butterflies, but invasive species killed the flowers, and without them, the butterflies could not survive.

Getting the butterflies back will be tricky; the first step is to plant lots of lupine.

"Maybe we can lure some of the butterflies back," organizer Janet Chen said.

Eventually, the group may begin to rip out the invasive species, as it used to do many years ago.

"We haven't even started looking at that yet, but we will," Chen said, adding that it is "very complicated."

"We have a long way to go," she said.

But volunteers are enthusiastic. Some residents have crept into the preserve, tracking down ATVs and reporting the license plate numbers to police. ATV riders seem to have

gotten the message.

"Neighbors say it's 90 percent better," said volunteer Lou Grasso. "Through diligent policing, we've gotten it so people aren't destroying it with ATVs."

The group is marking three walking trails in the preserve this spring, and Restore New York Woodlands will host a woodsman walk there at 9:30 a.m. Saturday, May 11.

At a neighborhood-wide garage sale on May 18-19, the group will also be selling T-shirts and hats to raise money for the cause. This summer, members may stock the preserve's pond with bass and hold a fishing contest, Grasso said.

The group meets at 7 p.m. the fourth Wednesday of each month at the Hibernian Hall on State Street. However, due to a scheduling change, the next meeting will be Wednesday.

Grasso hopes to eventually help the preserve return to its Pine Bush roots.

"That's one of the things in Woodlawn that's been neglected," he said.

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