

Mountain patrol 'envy' of New England

By Deborah McDermott
dmcdermott@seacoastonline.com

Posted at 3:01 AM

YORK -- This month, the York Police Department applied for a state grant to help pay for the cost of patrolling the Mount Agamenticus region. It is the latest application for a grant that the department has successfully received for the past 14 years, and is a cornerstone in a unique collaboration among the York Water District, Kittery Water District and York police.

At the center of the partnership is Gary Stevens, the York Water District assistant superintendent, who has worked on the mountain as resource protection manager in the district's watershed for more than 25 years and has been a reserve officer with York police since 2003.

In his day job for YWD, which he said is his "passion," he works on public water supply, forestry, wildlife, road construction and public education. But in addition, he patrols the many, many miles of trails in the York and Kittery watersheds and in the Mount Agamenticus Conservation Region, duties that require his presence on the mountain seven days a week.

For context, there are roughly 14,000 unfragmented acres in the Mount Agamenticus region, including Kittery and York water district properties and other conserved lands in the region.

"I like the law enforcement aspect because I get to help people, answer questions, give directions," he said. "I always work to educate them, earn their trust and only use the law enforcement piece as a last resort. If you are getting a summons to court from me, you know you earned it."

Stevens' patrolling duties have morphed over the years, beginning 22 years ago with twice weekly patrols of YWD watershed lands. At the time, said Stevens, there were "too many serious problems" on the land, including people camping with a camp fire, and leaving trash behind. "Pretty much all we were doing was picking up the mess from the previous weekend."

The YWD increased patrols of water district lands after that, documenting infractions in writing and photographs. This led to the 2003 agreement with the two water districts and York police to institute formal patrols over the entire region. Police began applying for ATV law enforcement grants through Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife several years later, and have had success ever since, amassing almost \$135,000 in grant funding over time.

"Our program is the one to beat in the state," he said. "We worked it out to be an exact fit for what they want. I have records for every single patrol I've done, and they see the work that goes into that."

With the funds, police have purchased four ATVs, which are stored at a garage at Stevens' office on Eber Drive. The grant money does allow for rank and file police officers to take four-hour shifts on the mountain, "which is good. They get to know the trails. Otherwise they don't know what's in here." But the regular, daily patrols are all conducted by Stevens.

He said it's important for people to know that the York Water District ratepayers are not paying for the patrol activities on YWD land - or indeed for many expenses in the watershed including equipment purchases, maintenance road building, water quality testing and even construction of his Eber Drive facility. All of those costs come from the proceeds of a YWD utility tower on Mount Agamenticus. "That ugly tower has brought in so much money. It's big, it's ugly, but it's ours. Some people complain about what it looks like, but all I see is what it can do for us."

As for the No. 1 problem he faces when he's on patrol anywhere on the mountain: "Dogs. Dogs have been the worst issue I've ever dealt with. 100 percent. Kids trying to sneak in to swim at the ponds are so much better than a 40-year-old guy with a dog running loose."

Over the years, he said Kittery and York Water Districts have tightened up the rules governing public use of what is private property - particularly after a leash law change in 2010 that requires dogs to be on leash. The first time, the owner of a dog off leash gets a written warning; the second time, a summons is issued. After that, if the owner is again found on district property with the dog off leash, he or she is not allowed to come back for a year.

"We started to clamp down. People I've known for years wouldn't talk to me. I've never been so poorly treated in all my life than from people exercising their dogs," he said. "They say, 'It's the woods. Why do I have to have my dog on a leash?' And I say the districts' property is private property, you have to follow the rules."

Over the years, he said use of the districts' lands hasn't increased dramatically, but the type of behavior has. "I used to find beer cans, the box they came in and the wrappers for the food. We just don't get that anymore. When we started out, people had been using the land for camping and swimming. Now we see couples on a walk, birdwatchers and families. And hands down, no doubt, it's the patrols that have changed that behavior."

He said his job as both a water district employee and reserve police officer "as far as the drinking water industry goes is very unique - someone who is able wear both hats at the same time. This makes us at YWD and KWD and the envy of many public water suppliers in New England."

The mountain is a different animal. For one, the number of visitors there has exploded in recent years, to as many as 40,000 annually. According to a recent survey, more than 40 percent have never been to

the mountain before and another 30 percent come infrequently. Add to this, much of the mountain is comprised of public lands.

Given all of this, Stevens said he approaches his patrol duties a bit differently. He can issue summonses, but mostly gives warnings. Overall, he sees his job as much more one of an educator. “I want to tell them why we don’t want you doing what you’re doing. I don’t want to ruin your day. I just want you to be reasonable. My reward is when I can change a person’s view about a rule, ordinance or law, and they end up complying.”

Looking back on this unusual public/private partnership that has been going on so well for the past 14 years, he said he can see the difference.

“This whole program has made everything so much better,” he said. “The support I have from two water districts, both their boards, the town and the police department is something. I’ve been so fortunate to fall into this position and be given the opportunity to build on it, and I’m pretty proud of it.”

Seacoastonline Link:

<https://www.seacoastonline.com/news/20190213/mountain-patrol-envy-of-new-england>