

FEATURED

## Patuxent River's 'Sneaker Index' drops

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Staff photoS by Tamara Ward

U.S. Rep. Steny Hoyer, third from left, joins former senator Bernie Fowler, fourth from left, and Fowler's family during the Patuxent River Wade-In at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum on June 12. The annual event serves to check the water's clarity and increase the awareness of the condition of the Patuxent River.

On a beautiful blustery afternoon at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, decked out in denim overalls, sneakers and a straw hat complete with a miniature American flag, former Maryland state senator and county commissioner Bernie Fowler ushered nearly 160 family members, dignitaries

and friends from underneath a large yellow and white tent to a shoreline to wade into the Patuxent River to draw attention to its health.

Much like Punxsutawney Phil, who emerges every February to check for his shadow, since 1988 the now-92-year-old Fowler walks into the Patuxent River to check for water clarity every June. Fowler started the annual tradition of having people wade into the river until they can no longer see their feet. That measurement, affectionately known as the “Sneaker Index,” was 31 inches in the event’s 28th year this past Sunday, down from 44 inches last year, the highest water clarity in history. The lowest was 8 inches during the 1989 wade-in.

“Today was a little deceptive because the wind was blowing real hard on shore and whenever that happens it’s going to stir up the turbulence. Now, back 50 years ago, we had aquatic vegetation; we would have had a lot more transparency then. There’s nothing to stop it now when the wind blows,” said Fowler.

Fowler has been a staunch advocate for Maryland’s largest river for almost five decades. Prior to wading in, he applauded his partners in the effort to improve the health of the Patuxent.

“It’s wonderful to know that there’s still some people that truly care about the health of the Patuxent River and the Chesapeake Bay,” said Fowler, welcoming a host of public officials, environmentalists and water enthusiasts under a large tent at the park.

Before introducing speakers, Fowler shared his frustrations and optimism about the future and benefits of the river.

“It crushes me, it really does — to watch this river die ... I want to watch it live ... I want to see those dead zones go away. I want to see that vegetation come back. We can never lose our faith; we can never lose our hope,” shared Fowler.

Fowler said there has been diminishing enthusiasm to clean up the bay and river and that Marylanders shouldn’t have to import seafood from elsewhere.

“We need to reignite that enthusiasm. This is an economic engine that would produce lots of jobs and bring us good Chesapeake Bay and Patuxent River seafood without having to import it from China, Korea, Ecuador, Peru,” stressed Fowler.

“This is a lot like preaching to the choir — they’re easy speeches. Sometimes the choir needs to preach back. This man has been fighting for this river for a lot of years,” said Kelton Clark, director of the Morgan State’s Patuxent Environmental & Aquatic Research Laboratory (PEARL). Clark led the crowd in a chant and promise to Fowler to “Never, never, never give up” on the fight to clean the Patuxent River.

Numerous politicians from far away and nearby, the left and right, came together and surrendered their partisanship to support Fowler and his love for the river.

“We need to have the enthusiasm that Bernie has. We need to clean up all of our waterways, not just the Patuxent River. We need to save it for our children and our grandchildren,” said Commissioners’ Vice President Tom Hejl (R), who reminisced about his childhood on the water and being able to see his feet at 5 feet of water. Hejl applauded Fowler for his preservation efforts and work in the state.

House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) took an opportunity to briefly acknowledge Saturday’s mass shooting in an Orlando nightclub, referring to it as a “dark day in America,” before turning his attention to the reason for the day’s celebration.

“This event, and why I come to this event every year, is about hope and vision and confidence that the individual efforts and the collective efforts of our leader,” said Hoyer, referring to himself as a “Fowler Follower.” “This is a commitment to our country. Yes, it’s a commitment to the Patuxent River and assumption of our responsibility as children of God that we will keep that which God gave us and restore and make it whole.”

In closing, Hoyer urged children under 12 to stand and told the audience those children are counting on them to preserve the Patuxent. Hoyer has waded in the water with Fowler for almost every year for nearly three decades and has measured for the former senator’s sneaker index quite a few times to include this year.

With the Patuxent River being a tributary of the Chesapeake Bay, it was no surprise there were bay advocates on hand at the event recognizing the interconnectivity and importance of restoring the health of both bodies of water.



“All of our emphasis is on restoring the Chesapeake Bay to its original vitality,” said Sen. Thomas “Mac” Middleton (D-Charles), president of the Chesapeake Bay Commission, an organization made up of legislators established to assist Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania with policy managing the Chesapeake Bay. “We wanted to do something special this year ... in all three states we passed a resolution declaring this week Chesapeake Bay Awareness Week.” The week, to be observed the second week in June, has various events in the tri-state area that increase citizen support for restoring the bay.

Other commission members were in attendance to support Fowler, who is also the Maryland citizen representative on the Chesapeake Bay Commission. Celebrating their first wade-in were commission members Del. Tawanna Gaines (D-Prince George’s) and Keith J. Gillespie, a member of the 47th legislative district in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. Former members were also present to partake in the festivities.

“I came here today just to participate and walk into the bay with Bernie and be part of the continued cleanup efforts,” said John Lipman, Maryland director of the Chesapeake Bay Commission from 1993 to 1996, who traveled from Massachusetts. “All these years later, I’m back down here because I still believe in this place and I still believe we can make a difference.”

Legislators from Howard County and Montgomery County were in attendance, to include Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md., 8th), who is known as a strong proponent of the need for more environmental protections for the Chesapeake Bay. Van Hollen encouraged listeners to continue the fight to restore “the economic lifeblood of the state” and likened the restoration efforts to riding an escalator.

“We all know we’ve got a long way to go. ... It’s like running up an escalator that’s going down. Sometimes you feel like you are running in place, but you gotta think of the fact that if you hadn’t been running up, you’d be at the very bottom of the escalator — this bay would be dead,” said Van Hollen. “Because of the work that you’ve done, we’re actually a lot better off than we would be if it hadn’t been for the efforts of everybody who is gathered here under the tent.”

While disappointed with this year’s measurement, Fowler was hopeful for the future and grateful for what has been done over the decades.

“If it hadn’t been for the hundreds of people that have worked so hard, this river would have been dead,” said Fowler, acknowledging there is more work to do. “It makes me feel great [seeing children play in the river] and they’re the people that will have to pick up the baton and run with it.”

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