You might call it baptism by raging whitewater, idyllic passages, swirling eddies and cascading falls.

Bill Dornbos was on his second day as executive director of the Farmington River Watershed Association when word came down that President Donald J. Trump has signed the John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act, which included Wild and Scenic designation for the lower river and Salmon Brook, including 35.3 miles of free-flowing river on the Farmington and 26.4 miles of the Salmon Brook tributary.

Local conservation advocates and state Congressional delegates had worked on the designation for more than 10 years.

“It’s about the best-case scenario for a start,” Dornbos said. “You start right at the moment when the organization and all of our allies and partners are celebrating a really big victory that a lot of people put a lot of work into over many years.”

While the Simsbury based non-profit, working with a local study committee, Congressional delegates, the National Park Service and area towns, was in the forefront of the multi-year effort, Dornbos, of course, can’t take credit for the designation.

In fact Dornbos doesn’t shy away from acknowledging he’s the new guy on the block in many ways. While he has extensive experience in environmental law and advocacy, and lives in West Hartford with his wife and two daughters, working in the Farmington Valley, and for a watershed protection organization are new challenges.

So, he wasn’t offended when one FRWA supporter told him that many people would be able to teach him over the next year.

“I was thinking, ‘that’s right, I should embrace that,’” he said. “That’s what I’ve been trying to do. I don’t try to hide the fact that I’m coming to all this as pretty new to the Farmington Valley. This river conservation work, watershed conservation work ... is also a new subject, a new focus.”

At the same time, exploring waterways and the outdoors isn’t new for Dornbos.

Growing up outside of Kalamazoo, Michigan, Dornbos found a love of the outdoors early in life.

In elementary school, he’d play in a wooded area in afternoons until the nearby church bells would signal the time to go home.

His dad, also William, was also a hunter and avid outdoorsman who passed that love to him and younger brother Steve, now a paleontologist, and Dornbos spent ample time canoeing, hiking, fishing and Boy Scouting as a child.

“In some ways that’s a very typical Midwestern childhood, but it’s how I came to love the outdoors and canoeing,” he said.

Access to the natural features even partially inspired his choice of Carleton College in Minnesota, where he graduated with a B.A. after majoring in history with a concentration in medieval studies in 1994.

The major might seem a diversion, but speaks to Dornbos’ love of
new challenges. Following college, he also became more serious about environmental work and obtained advanced degrees in law and environmental policy from the University of Michigan in 1998.

“I went to law school because I love the outdoors and I wanted to be a lawyer so I could be an advocate and see how I could take that passion and pursue that as a career,” he said.

Dornbos went on to work in several places covering aspects of the legal field, both private and public, learning about the field, the fine points of litigation and practicing civil rights, environmental law, among other types of litigation.

“That allowed me to kind of see what was possible and what wasn’t possible with the law,” he said. “I found it’s a very powerful tool if you’re looking to protect the outdoors, but it’s also a limited tool because you can’t craft these creative, positive solutions because you’re in an adversarial position a lot of the time and your remedies are limited to what’s within the law.”

With his changing mindset, partially inspired by his mother Jeanne’s “big heart and generous spirit,” Dornbos transitioned to non-profit work, and in 2007 left a prominent job with the New York Attorney General’s office to take a position as special executive aide with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

There he was able to see the inner workings of a global non-profit. He went on to work for Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, which brought him to Connecticut, where he met his wife, Elizabeth Benton, who is now communications director and spokesperson for the Connecticut Attorney General, William Tong.

After Yale, Dornbos worked on clean energy issues for another non-profit, Acadia Center, where he started as Connecticut director and moved up to advocacy director and senior attorney.

While he loved the field, Dornbos was intrigued when he saw the job posting for the FRWA.

“That was meaningful work, but I also got pulled away from Connecticut in a sense,” he said. “I wanted to be more focused on Connecticut again …. FRWA is a very credible, long-standing organization.”

“I’ve had the pleasure of starting the new job, but also really getting to know the Farmington Valley through this work. It’s one of the joys that I didn’t anticipate so much before I started. It’s been fun to get to know people and the different communities.”

–Bill Dornbos, Farmington River Watershed Association Executive Director
organization and the team here is really good. The more I learned about it, the more attracted I was to the opportunity.”

FRWA was formed in 1953 and its mission involves working with federal, state and local governments, business and people within the 33 communities to “protect the river and its surrounding landscape, in areas such as ‘water quality, water allocation, habitat restoration, recreation, open space and wetland and floodplain protection.”

That core focus won’t change, Dornbos said, adding that there is a sound basis for all the work.

“We’re science based, so how we steward and care for the river and watershed is based on science,” he said.

For example, water quality monitoring is a critical base for all of the work.

“The water quality monitoring work we do is fundamental to how we prioritize our work,” he said. “[It] has shown for awhile now that storm water pollution, storm-water runoff, is the number one pollution threat for the Farmington River.”

Such pollution includes waste on the roadways, from pets and animals, sewer use, etc., especially during storm events.

“All that stuff goes into the river really fast, too fast for the watershed and the natural filtering process of forest and wetlands and everything to handle,” he said. “That continues to be the number one challenge for our river, so that’s a pretty core part of work. In my mind, that priority doesn’t change.”

In turn, a lot of the FRWA’s advocacy and educational programs and work programs focus on that issue, teaching businesses, municipalities and residents how they can help minimize the issue.

Of course, the Wild and Scenic designation for the lower Farmington will be a key focus for the FRWA in the months ahead.

Similar to the upper Farmington River, designated in 1994, the Wild and Scenic work will involve the formation of an advisory management committee. Local municipalities with the help of the National Park Service, stakeholder groups and others will work on a management plan and allocating federal funds for conservation and education projects. The committee will build on the work of the study committee, chaired by Simsbury resident Sally Rieger, which worked for the designation. Federal funding assists the committee in river-related conservation and educational projects.

While the park service would have a role in reviewing any proposed diversion projects, the Wild and Scenic is not a federal takeover and land management stays with local and state authorities, said Dornbos, who also feels the partnership model is often underappreciated.

“It’s community focused,” he said. “That part I think is a strength and a positive. I think that’s the under-appreciated part of the Wild and Scenic rivers model.”

Additionally, Dornbos does have a few areas for which he’d like to see the FRWA organization strengthen its focus. One is with the fact that 600,000 people in the Greater Hartford area and the Farmington Valley get their drinking water from the Farmington River Watershed. Dornbos would like to see ties strengthened with those communities that might be outside the watershed, but rely on keeping the water clean.

Another initiative he’d love to see would speak to his other experience in the environmental field.

“I am trying to bring what I’ve been doing for the last seven years, the clean energy and
climate work, into this work as well. There are a lot of intercon-
nections there, I think,” he said.
He also sees further need for resiliency planning in the
Farmington Valley.
“Any want communities to
be able to thrive economically
and have strong quality of life
and public health, all while being
able to manage and withstand
all the changes in weather and
other impacts we’re seeing
because of climate change,” he
said. “To an extent, we’ve been
working on those issues already
as an organization, but I think
there’s much more work to be
done on that.”
While the FRWA does
sometimes take a position on
controversial proposals, Dornbos
doesn’t see environmental
protection as counter to
economic vitality.
“The really positive part of
all this is I don’t believe in the
environment versus economy
narrative,” he said. “I think we’re
pretty well beyond that. Finding
a sustainable, prosperous path
forward for the Farmington
Valley is entirely possible and
will happen if we take steps to
make communities more resil-
ient and make sure the river is
healthy as it can be — all those
things we’re working on now.”
Already the FRWA does
much with GIS and mapping,
but Dornbos feels the organiza-
tion can do even more with
scenario planning as a way to
prepare for the future. He also
thinks the FRWA should
remain flexible.
“We also need to stay
nimble and when we see
opportunities where we can make a real impact as an organization, we need to jump on those, too, so I’m excited for that as well,” he said.

Since concentrating in medieval history in college, or prepping for a legal case, Dornbos has always loved learning.

“That is actually refreshing and energizing, I like having the new challenge,” he said.

FRWA board member Susan Barney said Dornbos brings a lot of strength in the organization’s mission of research, education and advocacy, all in a personable way.

“He’s doing a great job reaching out to the communities and to the other organizations,” she said. “He’s going to be a terrific leader for the organization going forward. We’re thrilled to have him.”

David Donaldson, president of the FRWA board, said the organization sees Dornbos’ diverse background as a strength and one with which it can increase

Farmington River Watershed Association Executive Director Bill Dornbos is joined by some of his predecessors during a recent celebration of Wild and Scenic designation for the lower river. From left are Dornbos; Eileen Fielding, 2008-17, now center director for Audubon Sharon; Eric Hammerling, 2003-2008, now executive director for the Connecticut Forest and Park Association; and Kevin Case, 1997 to 2002, now director of the Northeast Region, Land Trust Alliance.
its advocacy work and initiatives such as corporate and fundraising opportunities and raise the profile of the organization.

"My belief is he comes at this with fresh eyes and a different perspective," he said. "I think that is a big plus."

For his part, Dornbos said that, in addition to the hard work ahead, he already loves the area even more than he realized he would.

"I’ve had the pleasure of starting the new job, but also really getting to know the Farmington Valley through this work," he said. "It’s one of the joys that I didn’t anticipate so much before I started. It’s been fun to get to know people and the different communities."

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“Finding a sustainable, prosperous path forward for the Farmington Valley is entirely possible and will happen if we take steps to make communities more resilient and make sure the river is healthy as it can be – all those things we’re working on now.”

–Bill Dornbos