

Beside the podium sat a pair of old, white, canvas tennis shoes. There are holes in the toes and along the heels where the canvas and rubber are beginning to separate.

These 24-year-old high-tops have seen better days and cleaner water.

Former senator Bernie Fowler and about 30 other people waded into the Patuxent River to see how deep they could go until their feet disappeared in murky water Sunday at the 24th annual wade-in event, held this year and last year at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum. Fowler has worn the same white shoes for each Patuxent River wade-in for the past 24 years.

This year, Fowler's longtime friend and fellow World War II veteran, Bob Rigger, had the honor of measuring how far Fowler was able to wade in, using the water line on Fowler's pants as a guide. Fowler was able to see his weathered white shoes in 31.25 inches of water.

At last year's wade-in, Fowler reached 34.5 inches of water before he no longer could see his shoes.

Still, this year's decrease hasn't put a damper on his spirit and hope for how the river could be one day. Fowler said he still believes that the goal of seeing his old high-tops in 57 inches of water in the Patuxent River is attainable in his fight against pollution of the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Walter Boynton, who was present for the first annual wade-in, said that the problem with the Patuxent River is that it was fed too much. There is too much nitrogen and dirt, among other things, in the water, and "it needs to go on a diet," Boynton said. "There is six times more nitrogen in the water today than there was when John Smith was here."

“We have a debt and a deficit in this river and we have to take care of it,” said Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md. 5th), who was also in attendance. He said the Patuxent River is an extraordinary asset to the state, but the latest analysis of the water was at best a C-minus, if not a D-minus.

“We have to be sensitive to what we need to do to make this river what Bernie wants it to be,” the congressman said.

One of the most stressed solutions for this diet plan, other than the special diet created by the Environmental Protection Agency, is advocacy for cleaning up the polluted watershed. Boynton urged attendees to talk to their neighbors about it, and to write letters to their political officials concerning the health of the bay and its estuaries.

Before everyone could run for the river in the sweltering heat, about 100 attendees along with several key speakers honored the former senator and the late governor Donald William Schaefer.

“Bernie Fowler is the real deal,” said Francis Jack Russell (D), commission president of the St. Mary’s County Board of County Commissioners. “He’s the best gift this state was given.”

Hoyer wore a white T-shirt with Fowler wading into the water pictured on the front in honor of Fowler, the wade-in and the meaning behind the wade-in. As Hoyer showcased the T-shirt, he said, “We’re all Fowler’s followers, and we’re gonna get the job done.”