

## Opinion

# DCNR has carefully executed a bait and switch effort on southern Chester County residents

### Letter to the Editor:

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources has been a great partner to Chester County in the preservation of open space and natural resources. This is why residents and local officials were so shocked in late 2023 when PA DCNR unveiled plans for development of the Strawbridge property in Elk and Franklin townships. If these plans for excessive infrastructure were such a good idea, why did DCNR go to such great lengths to deceive everyone?

As former State Senator Andy Dinniman very nobly pointed out in his Guest Column in the *Chester*

*County Press*, DCNR has carefully executed a bait and switch effort over several years in southern Chester County. While seeking \$9 million of state funding, \$8 million of county funding, and another \$15 million of donated funding from the Mt. Cuba Center, the financial decision-makers, as well as the previous owners George Strawbridge and The Conservation Fund, were all told (privately and publicly) that the property would become an extension of the White Clay Creek Preserve.

After the last parcels were purchased in 2020, the public was kept in the dark until the fall of 2022, when Gov. Tom Wolf announced the

re-designation of the White Clay Creek Preserve extension to the Big Elk Creek State Park. Even then, who would have imagined that this was all part of a scheme to make the Strawbridge lands more “accessible” to the public? According to DCNR, accessibility involves infrastructure for modern campgrounds, amphitheaters, administrative and educational buildings, and other active recreation. DCNR is now saying that “it was not intended as restrictive that Strawbridge could only be” used for passive recreation. Not intended? That was the commitment made to everyone involved with the transactions.

It is now clear why meetings have been kept out of view, surveys manipulated, elected officials disregarded, and local residents characterized as NIMBYs or elitists. DCNR even claims that local zoning and land-use regulations do not apply to state-owned land. It does not help that funding for this violation of public trust is coming from oil- and gas-related conversions elsewhere in Pennsylvania.

Maybe Gov. Shapiro has supported such efforts in similar matters, but residents of Chester County are now well aware that they’ve been deceived by a state agency.

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