

To truly protect the Big Elk Creek State Park, DCNR should enter into a conservation easement with a land trust

Letter to the Editor:

I am a member of the Big Elk Creek Task Force, established by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) as a result of a public meeting to discuss its vision for Big Elk Creek State Park held in January 2023. DCNR was pressured to create an advisory group to include members of the community. DCNR must have been put off by the word advisory and now I can see why. They do not want to be advised at all. In a recent task force meeting, we were able to speak directly to DCNR Secretary Cindy Dunn. The main topic was to re-establish Big Elk Creek (BEC), as part of the White Clay Creek Preserve. Below are my main take-aways from this futile meeting.

Secretary Dunn brushed off our request to re-establish BEC as a "preserve," indicating it to be a nomenclature issue. Re-establishing BEC as part of the White Clay Creek (WCC) Preserve is in no way a nomenclature issue. In fact, it would change the way DCNR staff manage the site, similar to how they manage their only Preserve in Pennsylvania. WCC uses existing infrastructure, provides bathrooms and a trail system with associated parking areas that leave minimal impacts to the surrounding natural lands and neighbors.

Secretary Dunn considers the word "preserve" as a weaponized term, meant to keep others out of the area. I take offense to that sentiment. A majority of the task force members have been pushing DCNR to re-establish

BEC as part of White Clay Creek Preserve since the task force was established. The intent of this request is to limit DCNR's impact to the area, to respect the rare and endangered species on the land, to maintain the bucolic nature of the area, and in no way is it intended to keep anyone out that wants to visit the land and walk on the trails.

Secretary Dunn indicated that DCNR is in the forever business. Initially, I scoffed at that remark. However, upon further consideration, they are in the forever business. Whatever they do on that land, however they plan to manage that land, it will have impacts to the land and the surrounding communities forever. But in actuality they are not in the forever business. They are land developers that

often build inappropriate infrastructure in inappropriate places for recreational purposes, often ruining the resources they want the public to see.

I have worked in state parks for 13 years and have seen recreational values trump conservation values every time. DCNR is not a land trust. The only way we can protect the vast natural and historic values of BEC in perpetuity is to urge DCNR to enter into a conservation easement with a land trust to ensure the lands that George Strawbridge meant to be forever open and part of a much larger wildlife corridor remain so.

Transcripts of meetings are available at the website www.SaveBigElkCreek.org.

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