



Big Elk Creek Master Planning Task Force
Meeting #7, Part 2 Transcript

Meeting Date: August 5, 2025

Meeting Time: 6:00 – 8:00 PM

Meeting Location: The Meeting House at White Clay Creek Preserve

**All Task Force members have been assigned a number in lieu of their names for the purposes of the meeting transcript.*

***Task Force members were given the option to join one or both of the Meeting #7 dates in order to accommodate schedules.*

Task Force Members Present:

- 1, 2, 5, 10, 14, 15, 16, 37
-

Meeting Minutes:

1 - Welcome everyone, welcome. Apologies right out of the gate—we have the doors open. There was a fuel oil incident in the building. It's an old building, so if you smell some fuel oil, there are still some residual fumes. I don't think it's too bad... but if someone has a problem, please let us know. Everyone OK with that?

And welcome to the in-person review of the master plan. We had our virtual meeting for task force members last Thursday, since we had to pivot due to severe weather warnings. So we canceled the in-person last week. But we're happy to be here once again in White Clay Creek for this master plan review. And with that, I'm going to turn it over to (name, #30) and (name, #33) to start the review.

37 - John, before you do that, I want you to say one thing... Right now, we just have to have the courage to start talking to each other—to really listen to each other—and I think that's important. No one is necessarily trying to do bad things here. Maybe people are just looking to make some improvements. But in reality, this is simply act one. Actually, maybe not—because act one, unfortunately, was what happened at the first meeting.

But the real issue is this: the people in this county have what's called our Open Space Plan. That plan was voted on by the citizens. It started in 1992, and it preserved thousands of acres of land. And when we say "preserved"—in the definition of this Open Space Plan—it means preserved permanently. DCNR, on the other hand—we see you doing very good things, and you should be thanked for that. But the critical question here is: how are we going to bring people together at some point in this project? We need to sit down, talk, and understand where each side is coming from—so we can get this done.

One of the great fears—and this is the fight— One of the great fears is that DCNR will change this at will. Now, whether that fear is justified or not—that's another question—but the fear is real. And in our Open Space Plan, when land is marked "preserved," it is a gift to future generations. It's never meant to be changed. And so that question—among others—is important. You're stating what you're doing. I'm simply saying: listen, I never thought at my age I'd come out of retirement and

start talking about this... but the citizens—so many of them, have called me, asked me, urged me. They were upset because they felt they were being ignored. No one's talking to them.

And so I believe this—and all I'm trying to say is—as you go forward, and as we have to go forward with our architects, we need to figure out a way that we really hear each other, that we really can bring this whole thing together. No one is saying that people shouldn't be able to enjoy the beauty of this country. The question is: how do you do it? What are the guarantees? There are going to be—well—commitments all day long. And I think we *can* bring something wonderful to fruition. So thank you for allowing me to say that.

And I have great respect—as you know—for Cindy, and especially for you, (name, #1). You've sat in these meetings for many, many years and stayed in there. And I know you share—I know Cindy shares—the desire to try to figure out how we do this. Every county is different, and the state has to take that into consideration. While some need economic development, our goal is *not* to have more development that infringes on our open space. Thank you.

1 - Thank you, (name, #38).

30 - So, some of you were on the call Thursday... so this is really kind of a repeat of that same presentation. If I miss anything, let me know—if you heard anything Thursday that I don't say tonight. (name, #33) and I are going to tag-team this a little bit. The presentation itself is really to capture the whole master planning process.

So, a lot of it is information we've all seen—somewhat, in multiple forms at this point. So I'll go through that part pretty quickly. Then we'll focus on where we are with the plan itself: the physical characteristics of the park, and a little bit about next steps.

I think, throughout the whole process, we tried to work within the guidelines of the Bureau of State Parks' mission statement... work with all of you, and listen to the suggestions that were made. And bring those into a more complete plan. It's a vision for the future of Big Elk Creek State Park—but a plan that's also flexible.

It allows the work to develop over time, and allows the park to be used, learned from, and understood over time... while providing a structure to build the park within.

So anyway, the park itself—you guys all know what it looks like. I'll skip through these photos of the park in different seasons. You've all seen that the designation as a state park comes with additional staff. DCNR has been, and will continue to be, adding staff over time to maintain, manage, and run the park. Our process actually started a little more than two years ago at this point.

The first thing we did was try to learn more about the area—and how this open space at Big Elk Creek works and connects to the other open spaces in the region... how those spaces work together as an ecosystem of open space. It's not isolated—just within the bounds of Big Elk Creek State Park.

Here is the outline that we've been working within, and this was the timeline. We started in early 2023 with information gathering, concept development, and the public meeting... the task force process has been going on for the past year plus.

And then, regarding completion—I guess I have June up there as when we sort of finalized it. There have been some challenges in getting a final presentation together. But I want to highlight this again, because I think it's important to understand what we *did* and what we *didn't* do as part of this process.

We did a lot of mapping and data collection. We did stakeholder engagement in the various ways you see here—and we'll talk about that in a minute. We developed concepts and then settled on a quote-unquote “final” master plan.

But what we *didn't* do at all are the things listed down here. We didn't do any planning or detailed design for specific projects of *any* scale. We don't even have detailed survey information at that scale—that hasn't been gathered yet. So we've been working at a higher level of detail. That kind of detailed design is part of the *future* implementation of small- to medium-sized projects throughout the park—potentially including trails, distributed parking areas, and the visitor center. But again, all of that is for the future.

So, here's what we heard through stakeholder engagement. Again, there was a whole series of efforts: DCNR put out the online survey, which we've talked about at length in the past. We had a series of stakeholder meetings in July—two years ago. These are the stakeholders who actually accepted the invitation and attended the various groups. We learned quite a lot from each of those groups. From that, we drew a series of key principles that we've pretty much stuck with throughout the process. And then there was the task force process, which all of *you* participated in.

So over the last year and a half, we've worked together—meeting here every couple of months—to talk about the development of the park. We had that one evening where we did the mapping exercise in small groups with all of you. These maps and sketches were the outcome of that session. We followed a series of concepts that were shared among all the groups who participated in that exercise. I'm not going to read through all of it—it's already been documented in the minutes and other materials that have been shared. There was a lot of shared thought, and many concepts had broad support across the group. There was one area where we didn't have complete agreement—and that had to do with whether there was a need for a building on the site. That's documented below.

I haven't updated anything since Thursday night—it was exactly the same. A number of other ideas also came out of that process—not necessarily from *each* group, but from one or more. Some of the ideas were already part of our initial thinking, and others informed how we moved forward with the plan.

(name, #33) in particular used some mapping that our civil engineer helped generate—resulting in a whole series of site analysis images. You've all seen these in the past. So I don't know that we need to go into a lot of detail here—but we probably should've said earlier: if anyone has questions about anything, just stop us and we can talk about it. We really did try to understand the rivers and streams, the soil types on site, the habitat areas, areas of existing vegetation, and how we might restore some of those in the future.

And then it sort of culminated in looking at areas where—this is actually site infrastructure—but then it culminated in identifying areas where some types of improvements might be considered. There were lots of potential areas to consider. And then, working with you, we settled on this area here—this kind of bean-shaped bubble—as the area for potential improvement on the site. I'll say this now and one of the maps later also illustrates it pretty well - The area that is proposed for any sort of improvement—outside of things like ecological restoration and the railroad—is less than 1% of the entire area of the farm.

16 - Can you just say what the green is? And the yellow—is that open farmland?

30 - Yes, the green represents vegetated or natural areas of the site, and the yellow represents the flatter, open farmland areas. And I just want to add something— These maps were also marked up by members of the committee, so that was really helpful. You contributed along the way to help this be more accurate.

And definitely, some of the elements of this plan—especially the areas of interference—came directly from those conversations.

15 - So this—I think—is showing points of interest?

33 - Yes, some of them are.

15 - There's Mt. Olivet Church and cemetery up there. I think you guys had that marked as being owned by Franklin Township? It's actually privately owned. That's private property.

30 - Oh, OK—good to know.

15 - I just wanted to get that clarified.

30 - Definitely—thank you. OK, so we also included, within this presentation or final document, a series of potential amenities that might be included in the park in the future. This is more of a *catalog* of ideas. It's not to say that *everything* on this list will be included—but it's a catalog that supports the mapping. It allows you to reference: if something's shown on the map, what might it need to do?

So the first idea was the potential for a kind of *spectrum of trails*, depending on topography, length, desired experience, level of accessibility, and things like that. We also have some visual examples of those types of trails as well. Again, most of you have seen all of this at least once.

There are a couple of building components that could potentially be included in the park. One is a visitor center and park office, which would primarily provide space for park management and operations, but also offer education and classroom space for programming.

Then there's a maintenance building. To the left, you see the *existing* maintenance building, which is actually not sufficient—but it's an example. The upper right image is from another site—again, not necessarily what the Gallop site would look like.

The barn-style inspiration could definitely influence the design of a maintenance building here. And then, potentially in the future, we could include comfort stations (restrooms). These could be co-located in the parking areas, which is something that came out of the discussions with the task force. This wouldn't necessarily happen on day one, but if there's future use, need, and desire, it could be part of the long-term plan.

The plans show potential stream crossing areas. These would still need to be studied further in the field as trails are developed, to determine which areas are most appropriate. Some may need major bridges, depending on the width of the crossing. Others could be smaller, modest, and less impactful—depending on site characteristics. The plan includes a number of distributed, smaller parking lots. These are just examples of how they could potentially be sited—perhaps with pervious paving or adjacent to meadows.

The maps also show areas designated for day use. By "day use," we mean low-intensity activities—maybe just picnic tables, birdwatching, or passive recreation. It's not high-intensity day use, like you might see in other types of parks.

33 - All right—so now comes the fun part: talking about the plan itself. I also want to give a shout-out to some task force members. Some of you really went the extra mile by sending us marked-up maps and lots of comments. (name, #8), in particular. And also a thanks to (name, #10)—we had a lot of good conversations about the finer details.

Some of those detailed ideas really came from those conversations. That's important because you've walked the site more than we have.

So let's look at the existing site. Starting from the bottom up: the 100-year floodplain.

We got a question about this last time. We have it shown in two colors, surrounding the streams.

Then we have the 100-foot buffer lines around the streams—those are areas that should always be protected. We've shown the existing well-traveled trails, such as Spring Lawn and Maple Avenue.

The purple triangles are the regional trail connection points—these are places where you might link

up to other nearby trail systems. We've broken those out into Chester County (in the magenta above) and Fair Hill (in purple below). We've already talked about the potential locations for the park office, classroom, maintenance, and day-use areas. This is the general area where we're proposing to locate them, and I'll show you two ideas shortly for how that might evolve over time.

We also have the road crossings and undercrossings called out. And I believe there are five of these smaller parking lots. (name, #30) talked about this—it was really important to everyone that if there's parking, it should be dispersed. These could range from 5 to 10 cars per lot.

I mean, I suppose in a place like this, if you really wanted to develop more in the far future, you could—but these aren't meant to be shopping mall parking lots. Let me also reiterate: we've sited these in locations where, at this scale and with the topography, we think they'd work. But clearly, as with that one in particular, you'd need detailed surveys to fit them into the landscape in a way that works really well.

We also highlighted road crossing points, aiming for safer pedestrian crossings. Some of these crossings already exist, like this one here. That's important—if you're building trails, you need to make sure there are good, safe ways for people to cross roads. We also talked about different trail lengths. Of course, you already have a lot of trails on the site.

We discussed removing some of the social trails—those informal paths that cut through sensitive areas, like wetlands. So we're aiming to simplify the trail system and protect the environment. We also talked about adding a short loop trail. For example, if you're following the concourse, maybe it could be a one-mile loop—something quick and accessible. If you were near the visitor center and parking lot, you could do a short, easy one-mile walk.

We also considered a longer, multi-piece 3-mile loop. The idea is that a lot of people like to know how far they've walked. So we're thinking about sequencing trails that support that while also avoiding having trails everywhere—because no one wanted that. No one wanted trails scattered everywhere. And I'll add—after we first drew this plan and reviewed it, (name, #10) gave us feedback.

He pointed out that one of the proposed crossing points was actually a bad location—it was near residences. So we adjusted that—rerouted the trail to a better crossing point. That kind of thinking is reflected in the plan, but again, you really do need to walk the site to get it right.

We already have some existing stream crossings, and we've shown those. In pale magenta, we've identified areas where you might consider additional crossings, or where existing crossings may need rehabilitation. These could be simple—for example, stepping stones or a small boardwalk—or they could be larger, depending on what's needed. We also looked back at previous maps.

Honestly, I've forgotten how many different data sets we reviewed, but we looked at stormwater maps, among others. When we suggest a potential crossing point, it's because the data show it's a reasonable place to investigate further. So we've documented that—it's not just guesswork.

The other important piece of this is thinking about your ecotypes, and how you want them to develop over time. That will really be informed by what's found on the site. I think it was (name, #11) who's been out doing informal surveying—that kind of on-the-ground knowledge is really important for how you build out these habitats. That's all essential.

One key point—the grasslands here are incredibly important, especially for grassland birds. They really need to be of a certain size to support those species properly. That's reflected in the plan. And we've worked to coordinate that with the Fair Hill grasslands, so there's actual ecosystem-level support across the broader landscape. As I mentioned earlier, we've even started adjusting trails so they don't cut through the center of those habitats. There's still more work to do on that, but the

intention is clear—we're not just making a place for people, we're making a place for all of our friends out in nature.

I think one detail—just the intention for the one-mile loop is that it's meant to be an accessible loop area. Now, that obviously has to be confirmed on-site with a survey, but based on the topography we have, we believe it would work well up in that area. And the idea is that everybody can use it—not just because it's accessible, but also because of the low intensity. It's a really wide area.

That's why we also put forward those ideas. So you have a framework for applying for grants.

16 – Is there a requirement for a certain number of trails to be ADA?

33 - Yes, because the federal government requires a certain amount of trails to be ADA compliant. I just meant—the federal government requires a certain amount of trails to be ADA, but the rules around that are a little bit more... Loosey.

The example I always use is—you've never tried to pull an ADA trail up and Mount Rainier because it would be so ridiculous.

16 - Oh, I understand. I just wanted to know.

30 - Yeah, there's not a strict requirement there.

16 - There are requirements—specific requirements—for buildings and parking, right?

30 – Yes, That's more regulated.

33 - But if you know you want to provide something that people will actually use, then you think about that. And then this was a notion of how projects might be grouped together as you build them. So for instance, we said the park office, classroom, maintenance, and the one-mile loop might be done together as one project. If you were thinking about major stream crossings, that might be its own project. If you were thinking about minor crossings, and so forth.

We always say in master planning—this is sort of everything-on-the-table planning. So if you really decided that the three-mile loop was super important, and you had a way to make that project happen first, then that's what you'd do. You wouldn't have to wait. And that's also why these are listed as Project 1, 2, 3, and 4—because we don't know the order in which they'll be implemented.

This gives you flexibility. And then this is the ecological restoration. Again, there's a map that shows it a little better—without all the other layers of stuff. And then the other piece is the hunting map. Hunting is allowed in some areas and not allowed in others. And of course, I think it's 150 feet from any structure—that's the distance where hunting is not allowed. And any of these trails also automatically include those same restrictions.

This is the map I mentioned earlier, where you can visualize—like that green rectangle—that's the proposed area for improvement or built space. And it's actually much smaller than that green square makes it appear. And you can see how small that is in the context of the entire park.

1 - That's the hunting boundary, right?

33 - That's the hunting boundary, yes. That's the—within the angle—is the smaller area that is the build zone. So, speaking of it being smaller, there are two ideas that came forward for this.

And as (name, #30) mentioned, there was disagreement about whether this is needed at all. But we talked about putting the maintenance building, the visitor center, and 20 parking spaces at the site where there used to be a house.

And if you don't remember it in your mind, if you use your Google satellite, you could actually go back and catch an old picture of that house. So this was the approximate building footprint, but there were also some outbuildings. And this is where your parking lot exists today.

So you could see, you could come into the park. There's a bus lay-by right out on Strickersville Road. So some came that way because they can get into the park. And then the idea is that the visitor center could sit in the south, and it would capture the morning shadow of the park, which could be quite nice.

And I said this last time we talked—but we showed some picnic tables. We showed it in the meadow. The notion is it doesn't just have to be like a brass plaque on the wall. You know, you can have some picnic tables and they can blend in more organically. So I think there are a lot of ways you can tackle that.

And then the second idea—and this came from the site walk we had on this meeting—where a lot of people really liked being behind the hedgerow. So there's the first site, and then the idea that you could come down the hill to this second site. The grades here are not too steep. I'll note that if you move further, it gets steeper and it gets wetter. So you don't want to go into those zones.

But the idea is that you could also site something here, and then you wouldn't see it from the meadow. So that gives you some flexibility to also make that decision.

And we did—if you did that—we would suggest that if you have to get a... and really it's not just about buses, it's about UPS and work vehicles, and if you have a park office, say, you have to be able to follow them in and turn around. So we've showed that. Again, this is a schematic diagram.

If and when this moves forward, you would get the full site survey. But I think that's the difference. The difference is: is it on the road where you can really see it, or is it really, really hidden from view?

23 - What I thought of—and I think I gave one of you a question last week— If you look here, there's no bathroom building on this site. This is the area where we have water supply and be able to support restrooms. Our visitor center and offices would have the bathrooms built in. So they're assessing what would happen, you know, if the office was closed.

So I don't know—I think you brought that up about bathrooms. There may not be any structure or bathroom structure. It could be housed within that building and that, you know, that would be true if that would be the visitor center.

33 - That's the idea. And I know some of you saw it before and some haven't. So that's where we're going to end. We can go back to any slide. We can take questions.

16 - Can you just go back to the slide with the parking? One of the existing—Springlawn parking lot, I guess?

33 - On the purple one? Oh, this one.

16 - That one's there. Oh, you still have that one?

33 - Yeah, well, we didn't even move it. Well, maybe none of this is computational.

16 - So I'm sure that Elk Township doesn't want that on their map because it's their—that's the only parking—

30 - Well, we just discovered that at the last meeting.

16 - So that was—we couldn't show it on that, right?

1 - So I'm going to cover some of the things that we covered too at the last meeting. Because we did discuss and agree with some things on the virtual call through review of the plan.

14 - The parking lot is all the way to the east. Oh, that's how Appleton—Appleton and Stricklersville? There's like a guy that has a boat there right now?

15 - That's right, yeah.

14 - And is that on state land right now or is that—I mean, yeah, it's—it's not very wide. We can't tell, right?

30 – It is state land. A little strip of it.

14 – And there's a purple triangle there so would that have a trail that connects over all of that?

33 – So Mount Olivet is there, and these are connector trails. That's an entrance now. But the suggestion by the group was to move this over because that was a dangerous—

16 - So I think what (name, #14) is asking is if what are you going to do to get to the triangle from the left over to the...

33 - You'd walk in on an adjacent trail, you wouldn't park. And that's the idea.

15 - And that's contingent upon Franklin Township agreeing to trail connectivity, which at this point is a no go.

16 - We wanted to know if I'm coming in on that left triangle, how do I get to that not walking on the road?

33 - There's a new trail. There would be a parking.

15 - Does anybody who hasn't had a chance to see the plan and ask their questions have anything?

1 – I'd like to recap the previous meeting because we did make some decisions and there were some points brought forth in the virtual meeting that were important that that we certainly will be including. So I'll just first start by saying what I stated as far as a wrap up of the plan.

This summary master plan which you've gone through now twice with (name, #30) and (name, #33) is a dramatic departure from the preliminary concepts that were presented in November of '23.

And that is due to the phenomenal work, the patience and the demand that was required of DCNR to garner your input in this master planning process. A dramatic departure.

I think the scale and the scope of the improvements, the elements, the amenities for the state park have been dramatically decreased, but they are still in keeping with our core attributes needed to provide safe visitor services and access on a state park, be it White Clay or any other state park in our system.

So again, I just want to sort of take that moment to say that this representation tonight, this summary is due to the good work that you guys have provided and it's appreciated by DCNR.

We listened. We heard. And again, from my perspective, this is a dramatic departure from the preliminary concepts from 2023.

14 - I agree with (name, #1) — it is a dramatic change. I think you're to be given a compliment from the planning group, or task force.

But first, I want to acknowledge what a big step this was — for you all to step back and take the time, and really take in the kind of input we gave you, which, frankly, was: “No way in hell are we going to accept what you were planning.” We wanted something almost completely opposite.

That was a big deal. I mean, that's not easy for a state agency to do. So thank you for listening.

Of course, there's still a lot of feedback that people want to give — and I think that's important — including some concerns. As you move forward and begin shaping the actual version of what this is going to look like, I think there are people here who want to make sure there's an opportunity for ongoing input. What that looks like, I don't know yet. Maybe that's something we can continue to discuss, but I think it's an important point. In the meantime, I want to congratulate you all on the work you've done — for taking that input, for being open enough to reverse course.

A lot of people might say this still isn't perfect — this isn't exactly what we want. And it's not fully locked in yet in a way that makes everyone feel totally comfortable. But I think you've done a really good job with something that's very difficult to do — especially in state government. You had a budget. You had a commitment to a certain development. You had to get that plan and budget lined up. And to pull back from that and change direction — that's pretty remarkable. So you do deserve some credit for that.

I just want to acknowledge that, and offer you thanks and congratulations for doing something really hard.

1 - Thanks also to those of us from State Parks here, we are professionals doing our jobs — we want to provide the best state park for Big Elk Creek that we can. So we appreciate that.

And I've gotten to know all of you over the last — I think it's been 18 months now. I told Emma as I walked into the office tonight: I've spent more time in this park complex over the last 18 months than in any other park complex in the Commonwealth. But all for good purpose. I've been in Chester County so many times — but again, all for good purpose.

During our virtual review, (name, #9) — who's not here tonight — brought up an important point. I let (name, #9) know that it wasn't done with any malicious intent. In the final plan — which all of you will receive in a full draft, including the text and explanation of the task force's work — there was initially no reference to the many, extensive conversations we've had on preserve naming.

That will be included in the revised draft because it was certainly part of the task force's work. So you'll see that in the plan and have an opportunity to comment on it once you receive the documents.

To (name, #30)'s point: when (name, #9) brought this up last week, the preserve wasn't included as a design element. So, it didn't make it into the summary plan in that way. That was an oversight on our part, but we're going to correct it in the draft you receive. We'll include the fact that the majority — actually, no one on the task force — disagreed with preserve status. We'll be as accurate as we can on those points.

Just a reminder: as we finalize everything, we want to capture what's needed, especially in the context of areas where there was convergence on the master plan — and areas where there was divergence. Before that, there will be an introductory paragraph about the establishment of the task force. Overnight accommodations are not a design element in this master plan. I'm sorry — overnight elements are not considered a design contribution in this master plan.

We set that expectation from the beginning: this would *not* be an overnight park. As I said in our virtual meeting, this is a "day-use" park. And that's the design and master plan that the public will see. We're going to get that document as ready as we can — hopefully within the next couple of weeks. Then we'll send it out to all of you.

I'm thinking a two-week period for you to read it and then provide us with electronic feedback — your final comments on the document. That's going to be your final contribution to the master planning process — so we can incorporate, include, or even subtract things where needed.

And if there's anything, well, I doubt there will be any dramatic departures at this point. We're only taking comments from the task force, so we can accurately capture your final thoughts on what's presented. And again, you'll receive all the text to review, including descriptions of each element in the plan.

Like I hit on, oh — and I forget who said this now — but it was brought up at our last meeting by (name, #36), I believe, who wears a couple of hats for two townships.

So this brings us to the difference between a master plan versus planning, design, and construction — which are very different things. When we're advancing improvements or specific elements of the park in the future, that will, out of necessity, trigger additional in-depth conversations and

coordination with the townships. We're not going to do that — nor *can* we do that — in a vacuum. The county is also a very important partner for us in doing those things, and we *will* engage in that coordination. I think it was... I said this last week during our virtual call. (name, #23) and I were out traversing the state.

We had just come from Bucks County, where we were meeting with township officials as part of the planning and design process for a park office and visitor center at the Delaware Canal. Again, we were having those necessary conversations — and that coordination with elected officials.

We will be doing the same in the future as we move into design work — and yes, engineering work — for this project as well.

16 - That leads into one of the questions I had, which is about next steps. So after this — you just explained that you'll take our comments, finalize the draft, and send it to us for review and feedback. But what happens *after* that?

Because you said that when you're ready and have the ability to move forward with design work — and begin coordination with the county and township — is *that* when people can comment again on what the plan is? One of my earlier comments was that there isn't enough detail. And I was told: "Well, there'll never be *enough* detail — that's what a master plan is," right? But the devil's in the details. So I wanted to say — and I get it — Look, I mirror what (name, #14) said.

So I'm not here to bash — but I *am* here to say I still have opinions (if you can believe it, (name, #1)) about where you might put the infrastructure you're planning to install. Where exactly is that going to be constructed? So how does someone like me — if there's not going to be a continued task force — get a chance to comment or not comment on the *actual* design and engineering plan?

1 - That goes back, I guess, to the coordination with townships and the county — as you mentioned — that's going to happen in the future. In addition to amenities and features that are necessary — like a park office and a small, modest indoor classroom space attached to that office — we also have to have conversations, as I noted in last week's meeting, with both townships regarding trails.

16 - So I would have to look to the township then, as a citizen of that township, to provide comments?

1 - Yes — as we move forward with the design and engineering phase. That said, I hate to be pinned down on project timelines, because there are so many things still up in the air. But the opportunity to actually see some planning work that leads into conceptual design comes *after* we finish the master plan. Then we have to align and secure funding, and move our Bureau of Facility Design and Construction into design mode. We can only do that after the master plan is finalized.

It's a similar situation to Susquehanna Riverlands State Park, where design work is just now beginning, even though the master plan was completed in the summer of 2024.

We're entering the design phase now, which will likely take about 24 months — including planning, design, and permitting. During that stage, we *will* engage with the townships and the community, allowing residents to provide input and feedback.

Did we talk about the percentage of land impacted?

16 - Yes — less than 1%. We discussed this during the virtual call, but not tonight.

1 - Sorry if I missed that earlier. The park is about 1,700 acres, so 17 acres would be roughly 1%. Major enhancements — like the restroom, park office, education center, parking lot, entrance, and site access — will impact only about 3 to 7 acres. So that's less than half a percent of the total park area.

(name, #23) mentioned community involvement through the Friends group. We discussed this in a previous meeting — many parks have Friends groups that get involved early in the process and make recommendations before anything even reaches the township level. In fact, many of the trails here were initially identified through Friends group meetings, with staff or volunteers scouting certain areas — which later moved into design and construction.

There's a different level of understanding when it comes to trails versus buildings. Friends groups are where this grassroots engagement really happens. I've said this many times, and I truly believe it — I'm very grateful for our volunteers and Friends groups. They represent the highest level of engagement in state parks. They have significant influence over how we operate and manage the parks, and rightly so. They volunteer their time, effort, energy, and expertise to help manage these resources in perpetuity. We're in this for the long haul — managing these parks forever.

37 - That's the challenge. No one here is arguing against the excellent work you've done in defining the plan. However, Act 1 Scene 1 was an unfortunate event, largely because people had different expectations for the park over the past 30 years. We still need to rebuild and maintain trust. What made it worse were misunderstandings from people like myself and (name, #9), who have been working with DCNR for many years. The word "preserve" was used. The connection to White Clay Creek was mentioned. So that created an assumption, and then roles and functions got flipped around. It's going to take some time to rebuild trust.

1 - I understand that.

37 - But I think everyone agrees it's good to see this plan, and hopefully what happened back in 2022 to many of us, including (name, #9), won't happen again. That's the point I'm making.

1 - Got it. Any other questions on the process or the plan? (name, #15)?

15 - Thank you. Relating to what you're discussing right now — about consulting the townships with actual plans when the time comes — this won't be a situation where you're months away from construction and just starting consultations, right?

1 - No, that's not how our design and construction process works.

15 – Ok, so there will be ample time. Because there's a lot of relationship repairing that needs to happen. I want to make sure there's time to review things as they come up.

14 - On that point — Can I ask what the vehicle for ongoing coordination is? Are there informal conversations between DCNR and the townships during design, or is there a formal process for engaging the townships (not the public)?

1 - The public will engage through the township — it's not a direct public engagement process.

14 - So what's the typical process you use to engage townships?

1 - It's not like us showing up unannounced. We set up meetings with elected officials, planners, and other stakeholders from the very beginning. We don't come in when things are 90% designed and say, "Here's what we're doing."

14 – So there's a point where you feel confident enough in the design to bring it forward for input.

1 - We might use a call or attend a public meeting. How that happens depends on the township or municipality — we adapt to their preferred process. We do a lot of engagement in Bucks County because we have multiple parks there. We've held public meetings in the evenings that are open to everyone. But we've also met privately with municipal leadership to coordinate efforts. So it will really depend on what the township needs versus what we just present to them.

37 - I recall that the county received a certain amount of money related to open space planning. My concern is making sure the County Planning Commission is involved, because they have been engaged since 1992. There is a grant writing process and specific definitions for all these terms.

Out of respect for all those who have worked long and hard on open space here and the money spent, that involvement needs to be part of this.

1 - That's why I called out the county, not just the municipalities.

15 - Okay, picking up on this, I think you kind of answered that Chester County will get more than 60 days' notice before any changes are made to the park, because that's part of the declaration of covenants, right?

1 - I'll check on that for sure.

15 - I also want to let you know that the townships have decided, even after the task force's written comment period is over, to create their own advisory or oversight committee — basically a continuation of the task force — run by the townships to keep an eye on things, stay engaged, and share information. So that committee will continue. If there's a way to engage with DCNR as well, that would be wonderful. But the townships definitely want to keep a committee specifically focused on Big Elk Creek moving forward.

1 - So does each Township have a separate group, or is it a coalition?

15 - It's going to be a coalition. The townships, and anyone who wants to participate, are welcome to join from this task force. But the township will be running it, so it would be all of us together coordinating with DCNR and State Parks, if you're interested. Otherwise, the townships will run it on their own, sharing information back and forth to ensure open communication. Whenever anyone hears something — whether from the county or the townships — that information will be shared with everyone. That way, efforts can be coordinated effectively.

1 - Putting you on the spot, but I'm curious: will this be a monthly, bimonthly, or as-needed meeting?

15 - That structure hasn't been decided yet. I imagine it will be more on an as-needed basis, or maybe a bimonthly check-in — whatever works best. But there will definitely be some formal committee, representing all townships and anyone else interested.

1 - DCNR and State Parks will request formal engagement and an explanation of what this group will do. That will guide how we engage going forward. Because it's essential to be part of those conversations. You shouldn't have to be trying to guess what's happening or not. There needs to be a clear line of communication. And I need that connection from the townships and the county to link everything for future meetings and work.

Again, it's all about communication, transparency, building trust in the community, and making people feel heard. It gives them an outlet to voice concerns instead of multiple people calling different townships separately. That way, concerns aren't siloed in individual townships. They'll have one central place to bring up issues that get shared with everyone. So, like you said, this is very important.

37 - That's what I was trying to say to you, (name, #1), earlier — people were so surprised. As I said, I kept hearing more and more concerns from township officials. There's a trust issue here, and you're going to have to rebuild that trust with the community. To do that, everyone has to be honest about what they're trying to achieve because there's no doubt that the residents of this county have invested millions in open space.

DCNR shares the same values and deserves a lot of respect for that. I've said this before to task force members — as representatives of the political jurisdictions involved, you're representing townships, the county, constituencies, recreation users, citizens, and neighbors. Your work has led to this plan.

Again, this is a master plan, not detailed design or engineering, but in my mind, it stands on its own. The good work you did to reduce the footprint, scale, and scope while still meeting the park's needs for safety, accessibility, and enjoyment speaks volumes to me.

I hope with the plan's release to the public, people appreciate and understand this and that it helps restore some of the trust you mentioned. Communication moving forward is crucial. I really appreciate the townships and county wanting to keep communication open. How we do that in the future is critical to rebuilding trust.

Part of the problem started when the committee was formed and people were assigned numbers. It almost felt like, "Okay, this is just feedback time," which led some to think there must be a lot of "wild, nasty" people in southern Chester County. That was the unfortunate message that got sent.

Why would DCNR do all this except to try to secure the task force members and others' input at the initial meetings? That only added to the feeling that something was being done behind the scenes. I never wanted to fuel conspiracy theories.

1 - There were several conspiracy theories that emerged, but the numbering system was designed with all task force members in mind. Some felt they didn't need a number and preferred their names to be public. Many, including State Park staff, are public servants with their names out there. So we showed up to public meetings, accepted good recommendations, and also handled some of the more extreme comments. And that was part of the process.

16 – You should get a badge.

1 – I thought maybe I'd make a little patch, like a badge right here on the shoulder. I'm big on uniforms and patches. (name, #23) and I were talking — where can I get one of those shirt. I don't do social media stuff, just the website. How much do the merch items cost?

15 - I get them at cost.

1 - I'm going to get some Southern Chester County merch. I'm going to order long sleeves since we're approaching fall. I want one for real, let's talk after. Alright, (name, #15), go ahead. Sorry.

15 - Seriously, I want to thank you—as one of your biggest critics and one of the loudest voices throughout this process. I feel it's extremely important to thank you all, first, for engaging in this process, and secondly, for the incredibly different plan you developed. I had two township meetings last night where I presented the report. I ran to one, then went straight to the next. Both were shocked—in a good way—by how scaled back this plan is. They were quick to congratulate and say, "Wonderful work, great job." But it wasn't just me, right?

This has been a group effort, and it required DCNR to work with us, which you have done in a brilliant fashion. I want to recognize that and thank you all because I'm sure I'm one of the last people you want to continue listening to.

16 - I think I'm the last. (laughter)

30 - We're going to give you numbers. (laughter)

16 – Finally, I'm number 1!

15 – And I just want to acknowledge that. Considering how it could have been, and how it was for a while. I just want to acknowledge that the process turned out very well and it was impressive to see the plan you came back with. I was nervous—I didn't know what to expect.

But the fact that it's so scaled back, and that you did listen, even to those who were screaming in the back of the room, I thank you very much. This is incredible work that's been done in the last year and a half, and it doesn't happen in a vacuum. So again, thank you very much.

That said, I do have some questions. One question from last night was about staffing. You mentioned 8 full-time and 7 part-time staff. Is that just for Big Elk Creek, or are they shared between Big Elk and White Clay?

23 - It's a complex—so both locations.

15 - Okay, so the numbers cover both?

23 - Yes, correct.

15 - Another comment I received was that Franklin Township was left off the stakeholder meeting slide for local governing agencies, Franklin Township was left off of that.

1 - I don't want to throw anyone under the bus, but I can find an email string showing Franklin Township was invited to the original stakeholder meetings. However, they failed to show up. There were multiple prompts from Rob Campion—

15 – I wasn't a part of this then, I'm just asking.

1 - I know that. Again, it's water under the bridge; it happened. But all municipalities were invited. And if they didn't respond, they were followed up with. Rob was persistent, basically knocking down doors to get participation. Those were the initial stakeholder meetings. When were they? In '22/'23, right?

30 - Yes, in 2023—two years ago.

21 - I mentioned this after because when we entered the task force process, I wondered why we didn't get full municipal engagement back then. I was concerned and disappointed that we couldn't get municipal participation, but we tried. Now, we're here.

15 - So during the call the other night, (name, #3) mentioned lighting and using dark sky compliant lighting. The only question I had was, if it's a day-only facility—which I understand it is—is the only lighting really necessary security lighting for the building and parking areas?

30 – Yes, for security and safety of the building and parking.

15 - But we're not talking about lighting the parking lots?

1 - No,

23 - We don't do that anyway.

15 - I just wanted to confirm. So it would just be for the buildings? OK, good.

33 - If you think about someone who needed light to enter the building, right? So they can get in safely.

1 - We have parking lot lighting in a few parks, but those are combination day use and overnight parks. We don't have that here.

15 - OK.

1 - I think I said it on the call—it'll be minimal lighting in this park. We're really concerned about the dark sky resource. It's a rural environment in the evenings, so you should be able to see the stars to the best of your ability.

15 - So we can all watch launches.

1 - I heard about the launches when we were on our field visit.

15 – Ok. Other comments I received were concerns about MS4 compliance—which is stormwater management compliance in the area. The townships are spending a lot of money dealing with MS4 issues. It's a very large issue with the townships down here. So any impervious surfaces, we just need to be conscious of, and we ask that you be conscious of MS4 storm compliance.

33 – Yes, that is considered. I mean, MS4 has to be complied with.

1 - When we're building any improvements, stormwater management infrastructure is at the forefront of our design.

23 - So at an acre, right? That's when it triggers?

30 - That's right.

23 - So you can't do anything there without triggering it.

15 - You mentioned the trail situation with the townships...

1 - There's a lot to discuss with the townships, and we're not going to solve it here.

15 - No, we won't solve it here. I just didn't know, since you mentioned negotiating with the townships, what that process was going to look like. How is that going to come about? Is it sitting down in meetings with each individual township?

1 - I think it's sitting down with individual townships sooner rather than later regarding trails—and that'll be park management.

15 - Can you understand that the situation regarding the trails is part of the lack of trust issue?

1 - I get it. State Parks deals with township roads across the entire system and how we work with townships on trails, roads, right away, and often times townships want to hand us their abandoned roads or trails because they're not servicing their municipal customers, their constituency, when it's surrounded by park.

And oftentimes, we're not in a position to fiscally take responsibility. But in this case, it's sort of the inverse. The townships have, and we're acutely aware, tried to have the State Park at arm's length on these thoroughfares that don't provide municipal services to the constituencies. They run right through the heart of the resource.

So that's what we have to resolve with the townships moving forward—as a neighbor and as a partner.

23 - If you'd like to talk a little bit afterwards or have questions, we can do that.

16 - Aside from thanking you all again, I have one more question.

1 - You want the last word, (name, #16)?

16 - I think yes, I do actually. (laughter) I think I heard (name, #23) say—or maybe it was (name, #1) or somebody—that the name is not yet solidified. Is that true? It's a two-part question. Is that true - like the name of this property—is it going to be Big Elk Creek State Park or some other name?

1 - I said this probably when we started the process, and at some point it was maybe repeated or mentioned during our master planning work. When Governor Wolf established the three new state parks—Vosburg Neck, Susquehanna River Lands, and Big Elk—we called out from the beginning the names were provisional. This is what we're calling them for now, but they could change in the future.

16 - So I'm going to ask you straight up, to have the last word on that name be preserve, and that should be the end of this.

37 - If you use the word preserve, you see then what you're saying, and this was one of the issues—it really is part of your promise of having this as a connection between Big Elk and White Clay is accepted. Sometimes it means a lot to people. Sometimes it doesn't.

You yourself once, (name, #1) that White Clay Creek is the only state park preserve and therefore where they said that there needs to be special consideration. We understand that and therefore treat it a little differently in terms of what we do. So I think at least to discuss that tonight, I look at it as a golden opportunity to start this dialogue—or rather continue this dialogue. And as the dialogue continues, trust builds.

As I say, I've been involved actually since 1984 when that land was given by the DuPonts—my mentors, Representative Sam Morris was one of the people who voted to accept the land for the Commission. So I got involved not just because citizens told me, but because a lot of people who worked on this issue are dead. I'm fortunate, by the grace of God, to still be alive. So I felt the real need to get involved. And I do think it could all work—but we have to listen. DCNR has listened so far, it just has to continue to listen. And the county needs to be assured that the \$8 million it's spent - because I was wondering if the county spent the money based on the word preserve, based on the promise that these were going to be conducted, that it was well spent money. Because for the county, that's a lot of bucks. And the reason we got all that response is that most of the townships raised objections. Even the Regional Planning Commission raised objections, and a number of conservancies are going to.

And I just want to listen and see what the plan comes back. So listen more to see what the plan is. So many of us have spent so many years of our lives on the dream and the hope that there would be a preserve in this county. And we did it even before climate change and global warming were firmly used terms. We knew it would help that. We were so proud to say that in the area between New York City and Washington, DC—if you add Maryland and Delaware—this is going to be the largest piece of open space and preserve in that whole area, one of the largest in the Route 95 corridor. So I think yeah, it's important personally to people here because (name, #9) and I promised the people something, and then it didn't happen.

So we have to do what we're doing now because we gave our word that we would work through this. And I'm not trying to be troublesome. I'm just trying to say that it's something very emotional in this county that goes back when Joe Pitts got it to pass through Congress and Joe Biden played a role.

When the original plan was given, it was like, wow, everything we worked for now is diminished. That's why (name, #9) and I came together—to say, listen, something was promised. We can still get it, but we have to work hard to make sure that it turns out to be real. Thank you again. But yes, and by the way, just so everyone understands, as we reach towards the next year's 2026 250th anniversary, this particular property we're sitting on—or actually sitting on right now—was a very important piece in the whole creation of this Commonwealth. We could be sometimes talking to this council about the Quakers, but the Baptists had a very important role too. So let's see what happens.

1 - I'm just tickled, (name, #37), that I got you quoting me tonight in the record. So listen, I just want this to work.

37 – Listen, occasionally it does happen (laughter). I just want this to work.

1 - I got it, so we all do. (name, #14)?

14 - You guys would go a long way towards earning my trust if the sign over there quit saying it was Delaware watershed. There's a sign over there that I talked to Cindy about this like 2 years ago, I was like, Cindy, why are you guys calling this the Delaware watershed? And it hasn't been fixed.

1 - Is it really? Our new site manager here, (name, #38), will check it out and make sure we're not miscommunicating watersheds. We should never miscommunicate watersheds.

16 - I wasn't trying to be smart about it, but we've come so far that if you were to do that—if you were to put preserve in the name—that would go a long way.

15 - And that's what I was about to say—I'm agreeing with you. That preserve is of the utmost importance to this community. I know legally "preserve" doesn't technically mean anything, but in Chester County it means a whole lot and means an awful lot to the people that live in this community. So if you bring out this master plan and present it to the public and instead of saying

“Big Elk Creek State Park” at the top, it’s “Big Elk Creek Preserve,” oh my gosh, the people would freak out.

You would have so many people—it would go such a long way to build trust and to making people feel better about the situation and inspire confidence in the process and where everything’s going. You may actually be able to get some more volunteers. It may not be a big deal to you, but it’s a huge deal to everyone here. I can’t stress that enough.

16 - So you’ve come so far.

15 – And you have. You have come incredibly far from where we were in the very beginning. And I can’t thank you enough for that. This would just be the cherry on top, the icing on the cake—the word “preserve” means a lot.

37 - It just means the work that many of us have done since 1984 when the DuPonts gave the land...

1 - I know, (name, #37).

37 - And when Joe Pitts and Joe Biden got White Clay Creek through, which all of us were dedicated to, would become a reality. That’s what I’m trying to say in the beginning—that there’s a history here and we need to respect that issue if we can. And these are not NIMBYs just saying, “We don’t want it in our backyard.” There’s something much, much more. And I guess one way I’d summarize it is while I appreciate the work of where the toilets are going to be—thank you, the question in this county is not the toilets, it’s the soul of Chester County and its special relationship between the people and the land in this county, which is very unique. That’s why we were the first county that ever put up these sums of money to preserve this. And that’s what all of us have dedicated our lives to make sure doesn’t disappear even under this huge development pressure that’s happening right now.

1 - Thank you, (name, #37). (name, #10)?

10 – I stayed quiet tonight because I agree. The things that I care about are being said by others. I support them and repeat them. But I will repeat how much I appreciate you listening to us and everyone we worked with on this. So, thanks.

1 – Alright. With that, we will adjourn this meeting. Thank you again for your participation tonight.