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Camping is planned for a new Chester County state park. Some locals don't want it.

Opponents want the Chester County state park to "remain pitch black and dead silent at night."



The Big Elk Creek flows through a section of the White Clay Creek Preserve near Landenberg, Pa., on Friday, July 17, 2020. The preserve expanded earlier this year after the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources purchased nearly 1,000 acres of land in southern Chester County. TIM TAI / File Photograph

by [Jason Nark](#) Published Dec. 18, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

On a brisk December afternoon, in the rolling hills of southern [Chester County](#), two women hiked along a quiet, gravel trail, wondering what might disappear if the state built a campground nearby.

Would campfire smoke ruin the blue skies? Would Big Elk Creek, meandering just below them, remain clear as glass?

Ever since Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) unveiled the 1,700-acre parcel as Big Elk Creek State Park [in September 2022](#), some wildlife, the women claim, has been displaced.

"Oh look, a bald eagle," Carmela Ciliberti, of New London, said as a raptor launched from a tree above the creek.

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An online survey [conducted by DCNR](#), showed that 64 percent of respondents supported some form of camping at Big Elk State Park, But Anteia Consorto, whose Franklin Township home abuts the park, said there were audible gasps—and a feeling of betrayal—during a Nov. 6 meeting at Lincoln University, when the agency revealed preliminary plans for a campground.

"They hid this from everyone," she said.

Consorto and Ciliberti have since formed Save Big Elk Creek, a group that hopes to cut back DCNR's plans and keep the land the way it is.

The campground opposition

When DCNR presented its slide show that night at Lincoln University, it revealed full-service campsites for RVs, camping cottages and yurts, along with a shower house, pavilions and amphitheaters, similar to the agency offers at countless other state parks that have campgrounds.

The online survey showed that 15 percent of respondents wanted no camping at all, and for many in the audience, it was the first they'd heard the word "campground" mentioned at all.

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"This was supposed to be a preserve, not a state park!" one local yelled out, [according to the Chester County Press](#).



Anteia Consorto, of Franklin Township, holds up a "Save Big Elk Creek" sign behind her home. The signs are staked into lawns all over the roads surrounding Big Elk Creek State Park. Provided

Most assumed things wouldn't change when George Strawbridge Jr., a Campbell's Soup scion, historian, and renowned horse breeder sold the vast parcels of hills, farmland, and meadows to the nonprofit Conservation Fund for just under \$32 million. The nonprofit then deeded the property to DCNR as a preserve. Strawbridge, who splits his time between Chester County and Florida, told the Inquirer he was equally surprised by the news and urged opponents not to compromise.

"It's outrageous," he said from Florida.

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The Conservation Fund declined to comment. In 2020, when the land transfers were finalized, a DCNR park manager [told the Inquirer](#) that as "part of a preserve," the land "will be more restricted than a typical state park."

"They're going back on their word," Strawbridge said.



Big Elk Creek State Park was officially dedicated in September of 2022 Jason Nark

Wesley Robinson, a DCNR spokesman, said the agency is trying to balance “the concerns and needs of the community with larger, statewide interests, including camping.” He said the campground maps presented last month represented just 5 percent of the overall land at Big Elk State Park. Robinson cautioned that the plan presented last month was preliminary.

A [Change.org](#) petition Consorto started to “Halt the Construction of a Campground in Big Elk Creek State Park” has garnered 1,841 signatures and a joint town hall meeting with Franklin and Elk Townships to discuss the plans is scheduled for [Jan. 10](#). Dave Gerstenhaber, a Franklin Township supervisor, said DCNR is attending the meeting, which was moved to a school to accommodate the expected crowds.

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“We really felt like DCNR had a hands off approach and that was their biggest fumble,” he said.

‘If you build camping, people will come’

DCNR said 37.9 million people visited state parks last year and that overnight reservations were higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic. The [bulk of the campgrounds](#) are in north and south central Pennsylvania. In Southeastern Pa., DCNR campgrounds are rare, one of the reasons why Big Elk Creek State Park, which borders Maryland and Delaware, is such a priority for the agency. [French Creek State Park](#), just under 8,000 acres in Chester and Berks counties, is 50

miles west of Philadelphia. It has sites for tents and RVs, cottages and cabins, and areas for group camping.

“Basically, if you build camping, people will come,” said Mary Fulton, owner of Birchview Farm Campground, a private facility 28 miles north of Big Elk. “There really isn’t any type of camping in that part of Chester County.”

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Fulton said DCNR campgrounds don’t allow alcohol and typically have more rustic offering than private campgrounds. Her campground has a pool, theme nights, and attracts more RVs than tent campers.

DCNR’s Big Elk Creek survey found less than 30 percent of respondents supported full-service campsites with water, sewer, and electric, but Robinson, said statewide visitor feedback and DCNR reservations show modern campers want them.



Cabin 3 at French Creek State Park, in Chester and Berks Counties, has a living room/dining room, kitchenette with microwave and refrigerator, full bathroom, and two bedrooms, and sleeps six. WYN FURMAN

In the [Stop Campground at Big Elk Creek](#) Facebook group, some of the 541 members expressed concerns about “partying” among RV owners. They worried about rain runoff, noise, light pollution and loss of habitat for wildlife.

“The park should remain pitch black and dead silent at night,” one member wrote.

Jeff Marion, a research biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey, [told WHY](#) that campsites can result in erosion issues and vegetation loss when roads and campsite pads are created. Marion told WHY those impacts can be minimized, through, regulation and education at the campground.

“You can sustainably design camping,” he told the news outlet.

Robinson said DCNR is not an antagonist against nature.

“Part of our mission is to protect and conserve public land,” he said, “not overuse and overdevelop.”



Big Elk Creek State Park near Landenberg, Pa., Tuesday, Sept. 27, 2022. In Chester County, the new park will include 3.5 miles (5.6 kilometers) of Big Elk Creek, which feeds into the Chesapeake Bay at Elk River. Officials say the creek was long used by indigenous people and was an area of considerable activity for the Underground Railroad.
Matt Rourke / AP

Dale Hendricks, who lives in Landenberg, said not all residents are opposed to camping. It was the rollout that bothered him.

“Many of us would happily entertain some reasonable scale and very low impact camping there — after perhaps a series of good old fashioned public discussions,” Hendricks said in an email.

SaveBigElkCreek.org calls for a “balanced approach,” including ADA-accessible bathrooms and trails, along with “youth group primitive camping to members of recognized organizations accompanied by responsible adults.”

“No bathhouses, no septic,” Consorto said. “Maybe the Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts.”

Consorto said the bald eagle she and Ciliberti saw on the trail often perches in her backyard. She started locking the gate there, recently, after hikers opened it and picked vegetables from her garden.

“We’re not trying to be unreasonable,” she said. “We welcome people to come out here. We want to share the land. We just don’t want overnight accommodations to ruin it.”

DCNR, Robinson said, is committed to camping at Big Elk Creek State Park in some form.

“We want to get this right,” he said. “We want to hear from people and hear their input.”



Anteia Consorto (left) and Carmela Ciliberti, walk the Springlawn Trail in Big Elk Creek State Park on Friday, December 8. Jason Nark