



31 Titus Mill Road
Pennington, N.J. 08543
(609) 737-3735

from the Executive Director...Cranbury Conundrum

(originally printed in the Stony Brook-Millstone Watershed Association *Wellspring* newsletter, VOL. 53, NO. 1 Summer 2006)

In the name of protecting the environment, do we have to clear and cover some areas with concrete? That is the conundrum that is playing out in Cranbury and elsewhere in the state.

This past winter, members of the Cranbury Township Committee informed the Watershed of a proposed 2.8 million square foot commercial warehouse development on the largest parcel of unpreserved open space left in that town.

A short distance north of the Millstone River, this nearly 400-acre wooded parcel is bisected by two streams and contains more than 200 acres of wetlands, some of which have been determined by the state to be of "exceptional resource value."

The tract is designated as "permanent open space (proposed)" in Cranbury Township's Master Plan and "rural-environmentally sensitive" on the State Plan Policy Map, a designation in which extensive development is supposed to be discouraged.

Several years ago, Middlesex County considered purchasing the land as open space. But while assessing the site, the County discovered that some 50 years ago part of it had been used to manufacture munitions and that hazardous materials remained. The County alerted the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which eventually ordered the owner to clean up the site.

Is it possible to clean up the hazardous materials on the Cranbury site and then preserve it as open space? Or does this unprotected open space have to be sacrificed to enable its remediation even though it has been recognized as having "exceptional" environmental values?

Under the commendable "brownfields" program, the state and federal government provide financial and other incentives to assist clean up of contaminated sites. The funds for the remediation of such areas come largely from the private sector, however. Land speculators invest in a piece of land, betting that future development on the site will bring more in revenues than the clean up will cost. The program has been a bipartisan success story and the system has worked well in many instances. Contaminated sites get cleaned up and new businesses sprout in abandoned urban areas instead of on rural fields and forests.

What's different in Cranbury is the sensitive environmental nature of the site in question, its size, and proximity to the Millstone River. While we are certainly supportive of the state-ordered clean up of the site, the area's natural resources should be protected to the greatest extent possible during this process. And the land owners shouldn't get quick and easy permit approvals

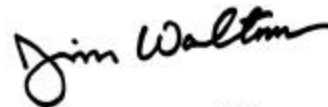
for the proposed warehouse development simply for agreeing to do what DEP has already ordered: Clean up the site!

Late last year, the prospective developer began clearing wetlands vegetation at the site without the required permit. DEP issued a Notice of Violation for the unauthorized disturbance of wetlands. Early this year, however, DEP issued an emergency permit for the clearing. The Watershed appealed the permit due to the lack of a field verified wetland delineation, a comprehensive bio- inventory, and adequate mitigation. As I write this, the agency is considering our appeal but has taken no action and the clearing continues.

The Edison Wetlands Association has coined the term “brownfields to greenfields” to promote the clean up and conversion of contaminated sites to open space “for the purposes of conservation, wildlife enhancement, and/or public recreation.” This may be a more appropriate outcome for the Cranbury site. Late last year, the state legislature passed a law providing financial incentives for just such conversions.

Concerned citizens need to track issues like these and inform town officials - and the DEP - of their opinions.

If the state’s “Smart Growth” policies are to be meaningful, then areas mapped as “environmentally sensitive” and “open space” should not be on the fast track for development as warehouses—even if the owner of the land agrees to clean up contamination on a portion of the site. After all, they are already required to do so by law.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Waltman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James R Waltman,
Executive Director