

Rob Rittle

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In a recent interview with the Gazette, White Township officials asked for patience from area citizens. Their request concerns a plan they adopted to sell 21% of the commercial-grade timber from our White's Woods Nature Center. "Be patient," we were asked, "and see what happens when the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) sends back comments on the plan."

I was doing fairly well with the patience thing. Then I gained three new types of information. Now I need help to decide if patience is a safe response.

The first bit of new information concerns the nature of the township's request for "a review by the DCNR." Township officials recently clarified that no review was requested using the standard administrative procedures. They simply telephoned one individual in the DCNR Bureau of Forestry, asking if that individual supported their plan. As a result, the "review" would not include input from the DCNR legal department, or from the DCNR Bureau of Recreation and Conservation.

This exclusive use of foresters, both to develop and to evaluate the plan, is a problem. It ignores the urgent request from citizens that the planning include a certified conservationist. A property easement for the Nature Center, as recorded in our county courthouse, states specifically that "This indenture is given to provide land for recreation, conservation and historical purposes, as said purposes are defined in ... Pennsylvania Statute 72, section 3946.20(c)." Why does White Township resist, so relentlessly, the involvement of conservation experts?

The second issue I needed to understand is a potential bias in the Bureau of Forestry (and in the DCNR overall). As one of the nine bureaus in the DCNR, the Bureau of Forestry supervises the sale of timber leases in the 2.1 million acres of Pennsylvania State Forests. This facilitates sustainable timbering, which I strongly support for our state forests. But I now realize that timber leases also provide millions of dollars to fund the DCNR's operating budget. This means employees throughout the DCNR are heavily dependent on sustainable timbering for their state employment. Can these employees really give an unbiased opinion about the Township's plan to sell timber from a conservation area as well?

The third type of new information involves the selection of a small natural area for the nature center. The problem is discovered only with a careful, on-site inspection. The problem would never be apparent to outside reviewers sitting in an office.

The typical tree cover in White's Woods is excellent, with a good range of tree size and good proportions of large saw timber (18 - 30" Diameter at Breast Height). Using a topographical map to locate the natural areas plus an ordinary tape measure, one finds the tree cover is much inferior for the proposed natural area.

Of the 22 acres selected for natural area roughly 11 acres are completely lacking in large saw timber. Either because of poor growing conditions or prior timbering, these acres are limited to varying amounts of small and medium saw timber (12 – 18" DBH). Some have spindly thickets of smaller, sun-loving species like birch. Roughly one additional acre of the natural area contains utility lines or access roads with no trees (note: the conservation easement does permit utility rights-of-way as a legal use).

So... much of the designated natural area is not well suited for timbering. Neither is it suited for a natural area. To further illustrate this bias, the plan proposes a test which the natural area is certain to fail. This inferior land would be compared to the far better land which is selectively timbered, in a forestry test that is highly biased.

A related clue about the plan's priorities is provided in Management Area 4, which is scheduled to be timbered **MOST HEAVELY**. This section includes the "Stephenson trail" and contains the largest trees in the park (eg, a poplar tree measuring 29" DBH; an awesome red oak measuring 36" DBH). Trees of all sizes are present, as desired in a self-sustaining plot. The area has the best diversity of species in the park, including black cherry trees that are rare in our nature center. This area is just approaching its prime, and could provide a majestic example of an older-growth forest over the next 50 years.

Please understand that I am not asking the Supervisors to share my interest in old-growth forests or in conservation best-practice. However I do expect them to be conscientious in understanding the laws regulating Township land. At least for this land, this township park that I helped to buy with my state taxes.

Omissions in the planning process have led to a management plan that is badly flawed. To meet the requirements of the conservation easement, the management plan must respect the wisdom of conservation experts and land-use attorneys. Why have the Township Supervisors been so adamant in their refusal to consider amendments? I want to be patient, but in this case the past predicts a bleak future.