

Alloway Creek Worth Saving

Alloway Creek is a green gem for Salem County residents.

The 24-mile waterway includes tidal estuaries, forests, wetlands and a rich mosaic of farmland, which together represent a green ribbon of important wildlife habitat within a larger ecosystem that is miraculously still intact.

The health and water-quality of Alloway Creek should be important to many. In addition to enhancing quality of life for nearby homeowners and outdoor enthusiasts, what flows downstream also has a major impact on several commercial and recreational fisheries in the Delaware Estuary.

The partial closure by the DEP of 334 acres of shellfish beds this past summer just offshore of lower Salem County was attributed to polluted stormwater run-off containing excessive amounts of nitrates.

While run-off from fertilizers used in agriculture tends to get the lion's share of the blame for increasing nitrate pollution in both our waterways and wells - where and how we create new development can have just as much of an impact, if not more.

As land along waterways is deforested and cleared for subdivisions and ever-more chemically-treated lawns, its capacity to absorb and filter-out polluted run-off is lost.

Equally damaging to waterways and wells are increasing household septic-tanks which, according to the DEP, discharge roughly 70% of their nutrients into groundwater - the primary source of water for both South Jersey residents and streams

Headwater areas are more vulnerable to pollution from above, because the groundwater is so close to the surface that it forms freshwater springs - the birthplace of rivers. Pollute a stream here and everything downstream will be affected.

A recent development proposed in Alloway Township by HKS Holdings to situate 26 new homes for a major subdivision smack on top of one of Alloway Creek's most-important headwater reaches, underscores the growing threat to the region's water resources posed by more development.

While many never swam in the pristine, tea-colored waters of Ponchantoula Lake, or stood amongst its great Atlantic White cedar bogs and brilliant beds of Swamp Pink (a federally-endangered flower as brilliant as roses), the entire community should consider the impacts that this ill-conceived development would have downstream.

For if the 26 new houses (5 of which are not required, but are being offered as a "density bonus") are approved, there is no doubt that one of the most sensitive and important areas along Alloway Creek will be degraded for all time.

The potential impacts to freshwater resources and endangered species are so egregious that even the US Fish & Wildlife Service, in a rare move, appealed to the developer's environmental ethic, requesting 300-foot buffers from the wetland edge to protect the rare Swamp Pink population.

Unfortunately, the developer's plan is to build within the far weaker state standards for 50- and 150-foot buffers, which volumes of research say is insufficient to protect either plant or waterway.

To make matters worse, the site harbors unsafe concentrations of several carcinogenic contaminants – leftovers from its former life as a graveyard for old cars. If the soil which is now stabilizing these hazards is disturbed by construction and the sinking of new residential wells, it is a real possibility that human exposure both here and downstream would result.

Residents in Alloway Township must demand better. There are places where growth makes sense and places where it is a seriously bad idea. Given the resources at stake and the potential dangers posed by contaminated soils, we urge the developer to pursue a different course and to explore the possibility of selling the property to a land preservation entity like the State Green Acres Program.

If there was a take-home message for Alloway officials, it is that this and future fights over new development would be greatly reduced if the town would finally follow the advice of its own voters and professional planner by bringing its zoning into conformity with neighboring towns by enacting a three-acre minimum lot size.

In the case of the proposed development above Ponchantoula Lake, this rather modest zoning change would have reduced the number of houses to a level where the development and potential impacts would have been acceptable – a non-issue as opposed to the current controversy now turning a community on its head.

If Alloway Township residents want to ensure that developers don't destroy priceless resources like clean water and important wildlife, they must tell their elected officials to enact a minimum of 3-acre zoning now, before the building boom takes self-determination out of the town's hands forever.

They must get involved and protect their forests with ordinances that prohibit clear-cutting for major developments, and demand river protection buffers, which would keep septic systems 150 to 300 feet away from Alloway Creek and its associated wetlands. Drastic? Think again - the Army Corps of Engineers suggests 800 feet as the minimum necessary to truly protect riverine habitat, aquatic resources and clean water.

In the meantime, we urge the public to attend what is expected to be the final Planning Board hearing on this project – on Wednesday, January 9th, 7 PM, Town Hall.

Matt Blake is the American Littoral Society's project manager for their Delaware Bayshore Program.