



Tell Millville it should preserve remaining Union Lake acreage

By Letters to the Editor/The News of Cumberland County

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By MATT BLAKE

The City of Millville is seeking public input from the community on what to do with the remaining Wawa-owned lands on Union Lake, now that 85 of the 400-acre parcel has been rezoned for large-scale commercial purposes.

On Dec. 17, the city convened a well-attended public meeting to provide an opportunity for residents surrounding the site to share their views, concerns and vision for the site.

This is an excellent start and we hope the city will extend the same opportunity to the wider community and not limit its input-gathering process to only those residents within the immediate vicinity.

Union Lake is of countywide importance and its development, or preservation, will forever impact the lives of everyone who loves and enjoys New Jersey's second-largest lake.

Therefore, interested residents and stakeholders throughout the county — indeed anyone who fishes and prizes truly outstanding natural and scenic places — should be encouraged to make their voices heard on this issue before the city formulates a land use plan for future use.

Nearly a mile of irreplaceable lakeshore frontage is tied up in the fate what happens to the remaining 316-acre parcel.

On occasion, some city officials have suggested that even with development there's still a 300-foot DEP-imposed bald eagle buffer to protect the shoreline.

The problem with that argument is that such a buffer would not provide any public access in the form of a scenic shoreline trail in the one area of the lake not dominated by inaccessible wetlands.

From an ecological standpoint, a 300-foot buffer would provide little more than a beauty strip or facade that would do little to protect the swimmable, fishable, and recreational conditions of Union Lake — measures of quality, which should be held above all other agendas.

Now that 85 wooded acres of the Wawa Tract are going to be replaced with shopping center levels of pavement, the need to protect the ecology of the lake only becomes more pressing.

According to the DEP, once even 10 percent of a watershed is lost to impervious surface cover (pavement, buildings, etc.), water quality plummets.

For a lake this magnificent, and one which already suffers from periodic water quality impairments, every effort must be made to adequately protect it from further insults.

City decision-makers must be mindful of the millions of dollars that all New Jersey taxpayers have spent to rebuild the massive dam, create fish ladders, remediate contamination, and purchase open space to protect this public-owned treasure.

The former 532-unit Matzel and Mumford proposal, which was so unpopular to Millville residents, would have still preserved 162 acres of open space.

Unfortunately the underlying zoning and density in the Lakeshore Conservation District called for far too many houses than local roadways and the natural environment could support.

Now that 85-acres of the tract has been rezoned for heavily trafficked, high-density big-box superstores, it only makes sense to rezone the remaining land in a manner that significantly limits additional traffic and further environmental degradation by severely reducing the number of allowable residential units on the remaining land.

For example, if the city were to tie a much-reduced housing density to a clustered development pattern that requires 80 percent of the 316-acre tract to remain as open space, a limited number of units could be built in tandem with preserving over 250 acres of the 316-acre tract.

However, if a small portion of the overall tract is developed, it should be located as far away from the lake as possible to protect the area's outstanding recreational potential as open space.

As clearly demonstrated by the overwhelming public sentiment at the last input-gathering session, many residents are in agreement with local environmental groups, and would rather see the remaining Wawa lands preserved in their entirety.

The city is, however, correct that it can't "simply" rezone it for solely conservation purposes. Yet, that doesn't mean it can't use zoning to ensure that as little of it is developed as possible — something many dozens of towns across the state have successfully done, even in the face of legal challenge.

The best option would be for the Wawa Corp. to follow the example being made by countless other businesses throughout the country that are offsetting their contribution to climate change by aiding efforts to preserve important forestlands. It just so happens that Wawa already owns such a forest, and is in the unique position to leave a legacy that will matter to people for generations to come.

If you believe that Union Lake is a public treasure that should be saved, we urge you to write your local newspaper and submit a letter to the City of Millville. The city is listening, now it's up to the public to do their part in making the call for preservation loud and clear.

Letters to the city should be sent to:
Linda Branin, Board Secretary
City of Millville Planning Board
P.O. Box 609
Millville, NJ 08332

Matt Blake manages the American Littoral Society's Delaware Bay Program. He has a Master's of Science degree from Antioch University in Resource Management and Administration.

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