

Unintended Consequences of Motorsports Park Already Here

By Matt Blake

Understandably, there is a lot of excitement this summer surrounding the opening of the Motorsports Park. This new “Disneyland of Millville,” as some have called it, may well live up to its hype in terms of bringing thousands of visitors and jobs to the city. It is a gamble to be sure, but is one which required bold leadership at both the local and county level. Alas, every rose has its thorns, and the most evident counterpart to the roaring engines and fanfare is the opening of an important part of the county’s rich agricultural and forest resources to rapid urbanization and sprawl.

Anyone who has driven down Buckshutem Road over the last several months has witnessed the transformation of the landscape now taking place. Until recently, this area was one of South Jersey’s most scenic byways to the shore. As the *for sale* signs for commercial, retail, hotels, houses and pad sites continue to spring up like weeds along the northern flanks of the Buckshutem and Millville Wildlife Management Areas, one cannot help but wonder how the two prized, yet incomplete forest reserves and their associated wildlife will coexist with wholesale clear-cutting and major development.



Land uses in opposition on Buckshutem Rd.

Indeed, vast stretches of important woodlands and farmland surrounding the massive 700-acre Motorsports Park complex are now being opened to real-estate speculation, strip malls, hotels, and subdivisions - all atop an area that a recent Nature Conservancy study determined to be one of the State’s top-five most biologically rich, yet vulnerable forests.

While growth and jobs are needed in Cumberland County, it is just as important that every effort be made to locate it fairly and where it makes the most sense. It should be purposely directed toward existing infrastructure, along commercial corridors like route 47 in Vineland and Millville - not in large blocks of contiguous

farmland or forest. In addition, sound planning that protects the rural environs will help ensure that a fair share of the growth and investment is also re-directed into downtown Bridgeton and Fairton, where redevelopment and the enterprise of small businesses are one of the county's greatest unmet economic needs.

Instead, however, it seems the focus is on replacing state-important forest and agricultural resources along Route 49 and Buckshutem Roads with unending strip development - the hallmark of sprawl and the death of inner cities and historic towns.

New development along these roads "may" help Millville capture the lion's-share of motorsports-related ratables; however, this could also draw business *away* from areas where growth is most needed, defeating the raceway's original purpose of revitalizing the county's economically distressed growth centers and downtowns.

In addition, the region's agricultural land-base is also feeling the gravity of Motorsports Park, whose impacts will reach far beyond Cumberland County. Of the projected 400,000 annual racetrack visitors, many will come from Delaware and the 295 Interchange, traveling along Route 49, which bisects both Salem and Cumberland Counties' Agricultural Development Areas, numerous towns and rural communities.

Some have already publicly stated their desire to see Route 49 become an expressway if traffic jams become the norm. However, before rushing to four lanes, our leaders should first consider what happened to other farm belts and rural areas across the state once they were opened to the commuter convenience of new highways. The public has already invested millions in preserving farms and open space in the very areas being made vulnerable by those whose growth agendas are facilitating increased development pressure. How viable will agriculture become if every preserved farm in South Jersey is surrounded by three others that have fallen to sprawl?

While we'll continue to lose land to development no matter what we do, local and county officials need to actively support efforts to preserve the best of what remains now - not just farmland, but also the best parts of the county's unprotected natural areas.

As we set foot in the undeniably impressive Motorsports Park for the first time, we should take a moment to consider the fast and furious side-effects this new attraction is already having on the County's scenic underbelly—the impact on places like Buckshutem Wildlife Management Area (still only half completed); on the vast stretches of important farmland along the Bayshore's east-to-west running thoroughfares; and on the row-crops that will be replaced by rows of houses and North Jersey-style traffic. As we consider these possibilities, we should also remember that it doesn't have to be that way. Our citizens can benefit greatly from this new attraction—but let's not sacrifice the quality of life and natural beauty that attracted it to Cumberland County in the first place.

Matt Blake is the Delaware Bayshore Project Manager for the American Littoral Society.