

## **Preserve Union Lake Tracts**

As Wawa Inc. considers its options for the 395-acre forested gem it owns along the incredibly scenic shoreline of Union Lake, both Millville and county decision-makers should also consider a window of opportunity that won't come again.

In 1982, Wawa Inc. helped create one of the most beautiful natural areas in state when it sold the 889 acre lake and over 4,000 acres of shoreline and fragile watershed lands to the State Green Acres Program.

Unfortunately, the landmark deal did not include the 395-acre tract on the northeast shoreline, or the 50-acre "bluffs" tract to the south – both of which have remained a preservation priority among conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts ever since.

In the years since the formation of the Union Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA), this prized recreational asset has seen several major improvements from the ongoing removal of arsenic-laden sediments upstream of the lake, to the construction of a massive new dam, fish ladders, and the installation of public access points for fishing and boating.

These significant public investments that made it all possible have dramatically improved water quality and fishery health both at Union Lake and the Maurice River. So much so that the lake is becoming a renowned fishing destination, which Mid-Atlantic Game & Fish Magazine recently called one of the top four best places in the state for bigmouth bass fishing.

However, the ongoing efforts to protect and provide adequate recreational access to New Jersey's second largest lake remain incomplete.

What's missing are the last two tracts of undeveloped and unprotected land owned by Wawa Inc., which if preserved and developed as usable parkland with vitally important public access along the shoreline for fishing and hiking would greatly benefit both residents and visitors alike.

While development proponents see construction jobs and greater activity in the downtown resulting from some form of development at these sites, many including the city have been justifiably concerned that massive new residential development projects like the 532-unit Matzel and Mumford proposal, would have had a significant impact on traffic and placed increased demands on already stretched services from police to schooling and fire.

Conservationists and many vocal residents believe the best use for the 395-acre site is outright preservation for ecology and outdoor recreation as a critical expansion to the Union Lake (WMA) - an idea clearly supported by the State Office of Smart Growth and DEP when these agencies designated much of the tract as Environmentally Sensitive in the State Plan. Under this scenario, the state would manage the tract as a largely unimproved natural area with modest trails and little infrastructure

If partial development becomes inevitable it should only be because it presents a clearly important public benefit that strikes a generous balance with environmental protection, generous open space and public access. If complete preservation becomes infeasible, the city should make every effort to ensure that the final site plan at a minimum includes at least a 300-acre lakeside natural area for residents and visitors alike.

However, the city may also realize that residential or commercial development is not the best use for this unique site given the current housing market and obvious need to increase tourism and visitation to the downtown.

For example, the results of the recent survey by JGSC Group for Millville clearly indicate that in order to attract more visitors and tourists for lengthier stays in the downtown area, the city needs to provide more diverse events and activities. With the awesome backdrop of Union Lake's unsurpassed scenery, sizeable acreage and proximity to highway access, the 395-acre tract could alternatively be transformed into a county or municipal park with recreational facilities, group picnic areas and wide accessible trails.

In place of a massive housing development with uncertain long-term economic benefits to Millville given the increased need for expensive public services, the tract could instead serve as a regional destination for large groups and families attracted to the lakefront area's commanding views and usable open space.

Not only would a Union Lake Park bring added visitors and events to Millville and to the county as a whole, it would also greatly enhance quality of life for Millville residents, families and children by connecting them to a lake which has represented one of South Jersey's greatest underutilized assets for far too long.

With the development of a Union Lake Park, the county would be one step closer to creating a critical mass or synergy of events and destinations necessary to truly creating a viable tourism industry.

Matzel and Mumford's withdrawal affords the city and county a unique opportunity to enter into discussions with Wawa, land trust groups and the State Green Acres Program to finally protect and preserve the jewel of Cumberland County.

While some may argue that this is not the time for Millville and the county to be bold and invest in the future, we should not forget that during the height of the Great Depression, America was expanding and developing its parkland to inspire both current and future generations, while putting people to back to work.

Union Lake is far too ecologically unique and important to the county's growing tourism industry to be wasted on another residential subdivision or big-box superstore. It belongs to the citizens of New Jersey and Cumberland County and is a public resource without comparison elsewhere in the state.

Such a place should serve as a scenic gateway and staging area for county-wide tourism, recreation and nature tourism activities.

It should be shared and used to make the downtown a more attractive place to live, visit and relocate to.

In order to finally complete the preservation of Union Lake, Wawa Inc, the City of Millville and the county must join together with other preservation partners in hammering out a land deal and plan that strikes a balance between public use, ecology and other compelling uses that directly benefit the both downtown and county residents alike.

*(Matt Blake is the Delaware Bay Project Manager for the American Littoral Society)*