



A Reprieve for the County's Cleanest Stream

Ten Mile Creek Amendment Approved By the County Council

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The forested and intricate waterways of Clarksburg in Northern Montgomery County have been yielding to a changing landscape over the last twenty years. On October 9, the County Council unanimously decided to apply lessons learned by directing the Planning Department to prepare an amendment to Clarksburg's 1994 Master Plan. The new amendment will require systematic protection and oversight for the Ten Mile Creek Watershed during the final stage of the community's growth.

Since the 1990s, the traditionally rural community situated at the northern end of I-270 has been undergoing a steady, ongoing transition into a major population center. Clarksburg's development into an urbanized community has been wrought by controversy and debate for years, however, resulting in its currently unfinished state as a collection of isolated residential neighborhoods. Much of the deliberation surrounding Clarksburg's development is a result of the fact that the town is being built on an area that holds one of the most valuable and also fragile waterways in the county.



Section of Ten Mile Creek running through Black Hills Regional Park

Clarksburg covers much of the drainage area of Ten Mile Creek, an environmentally sensitive tributary of Little Seneca Creek. Ten Mile Creek flows directly into the Little Seneca Reservoir, an emergency drinking water supply for the county located in Black Hills Regional Park just south of Clarksburg. According to the [Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection](#), the ecology of the stream is unusually rich as a result of the watershed's location on a fracture fault line that has shaped its channels. This is why the County designated the eastern part of the stream's watershed, which is not already protected by rural zoning, as a Special Protection Area in the Clarksburg Master Plan. Development in this area must be carefully planned and implemented.

This Special Protection Area is also the site of much of the development proposed for creek's headwaters in the final stage of [Clarksburg's four-stage Master Plan](#). Southwest of I-270, Pulte Homes owns land now zoned for up to 900 more residential units on 529 acres of agricultural land. Northeast of I-270, Petersen Company has proposed to build a massive commercial-residential complex near Clarksburg Town Center, with almost 600,000 square feet of commercial space planned.

"It's jaw-dropping what is planned to take place if you visit Clarksburg and see yourself the land that is zoned for development. This sprawl is not supported by public services, and so much topography will be altered," said Caroline Taylor, executive director of the Montgomery Countryside Alliance (MCA). Taylor is among the advocates from the MCA who partnered with Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS) to coordinate a citizen campaign to protect Ten Mile Creek that [successfully petitioned for the Amendment's approval](#). The area is served by a vast underground aquifer that will be degraded if the watershed cannot support building at densities currently planned.

Such degradation has already begun to occur. Stream water quality in the Special Protection Area has already declined from *excellent* to *good* ranges, to *good* to *fair* ranges, as a result of the development that has taken place so far in this area. The Limited Master Plan Amendment, according to an Oct. 5, 2012 letter from Planning Board Chair Francoise Carrier, "...will determine how comprehensive watershed protection and state-of-the-art Environmental Site Design can be used in the Ten Mile Creek watershed to best achieve sustainability and the original master plan environmental protection and community building goals."

Norman Mease, whose family farm is crossed by one of the creek's tributaries in Clarksburg, is intimate with the stream's terrain. Since the 1990s, he also has been working with the Department of Environmental Protection and ANS to document and monitor what is known about the stream's aquatic life. Mease is concerned that zoning at current densities in the Special Protection Area cannot be supported by the watershed.

"The geology and steep slopes in the area already create a lot of runoff," Mease said. "The use of storm ponds and best management practices have effectively reduced the runoff rate so far. However, the question is whether [existing measures] are sufficient for this terrain and geology given the number of homes and impervious surfaces proposed." Mease thinks 900 homes may be a density that is too high.

Further upstream from Mease's farm, Montgomery County residents gathered for the Oktoberfest just a few days before the Council met to decide whether to amend the Clarksburg Master Plan. This year's Oktoberfest was held on the headwaters of Ten Mile Creek on the agricultural land zoned for development northeast of I-270 on October 6. Those who lived in Clarksburg expressed discontent about continuing to live in a sprawling, unfinished community without access to a town center and its resources.

"We're from France, we're used to walking to go places" said J.P. Ducasse of Clarksburg. "On route 355 it's very difficult to walk, even with walkways. So, more needs to be done." He said he wants planners to focus on making existing neighborhoods denser and more pedestrian friendly rather than adding to the current sprawl.

The Clarksburg Town Center is planned to be built just outside the headwaters of the creek. The project was approved in a 2011 Master Plan amendment that the County added to hasten the development of a walkable shopping district for current residents, who must currently drive more than five miles to the nearest grocery store. Consideration of proposals to build more residences in the headwaters have been exacerbating the ongoing delay in building the Town Center, which still has not begun. Elm Street Development Company [took over the project in 2011](#) from the Newland Corporation following years of controversy and delay in building. Company Heads at Elm Street Development did not reply to inquiries from Conservation Montgomery about their project.

Meanwhile, for residents living in surrounding areas, the issues complicating the Stage 4 development in Clarksburg represented an impasse in misguided political priorities.

Dave, who gave only his first name, of Montgomery Village talked with Diane Cameron of ANS at the festival. “They don’t have the infrastructure already to keep building and building, yet they do. There are developments going up and efforts to expand roads,” he said. He viewed the proposed building as an effort to ultimately bring in more revenue to the local government.

Lawrence Evans, a real estate consultant and Chair of the Germantown Alliance, was also at the Oktoberfest and felt similarly.

“The county is looking after itself, always looking for profit, not after people,” he said.

By the time the Montgomery County Council convened the following Tuesday to hold its planning session on the Clarksburg Master Plan, more than 1,000 county residents had signed the petition circulated online and at the Oktoberfest to protect the Ten Mile Creek watershed. Councilmembers ultimately were persuaded in favor of an amendment which has been under discussion for years. An Ad Hoc Water Quality [Working Group appointed by the Council in 2009](#) presented a [majority report](#) in 2010 stating that the Ten Mile Creek watershed could not support development given current best practices. Their debate was focused instead on the urgency of completing an environmental assessment and determining watershed protection and land cover criteria, such as imperviousness limits, within a relatively short amount of time and also of the necessity to obtain a scientifically based, unbiased assessment from an independent party.

Councilmember Craig Rice, whose constituency includes residents of Clarksburg, emphasized his concern for providing Clarksburg residents with a town that provides access to community resources while also preserving environmental resources. In support of the amendment, Rice stated, “The common goal was always to make sure we respect the rights of the citizens of Clarksburg, but also to protect the water. It came down to us coming up with a way to accomplish both of these things.”

Rice also stressed his concern, along with the rest of the Council, that a Master Plan amendment would “reopen complications and halt progress” in a community that has been fraught with delays in completion. The Montgomery County Planning Board assured the Council they would strive to provide a scientifically driven assessment in 12 months.

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