

Summary of the LMPC meeting of October 2, 2024

<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~lebelp/LeonardMillPondCollaborative.html>

A meeting of the Leonard Mill Pond Collaborative (LMPC) was held at the Wicomico County Tourist Center, from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. Thirteen residents were in attendance, in addition to Wicomico County Superintendent of Parks and Recreation Chuck Poole, and Michael Svaby Deputy Administrator of Wicomico County Public Works, and Laura Soper, Senior Tourism Specialist of Wicomico County Tourism. This was the first in-person meeting since the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2021.

Chuck Poole, County Parks and Recreation

Chuck Poole led off the meeting with a presentation on the status of weed control measures taken this year and an update on the boat ramp adjacent to the County Tourist Center. He reported that based on an earlier assessment by the State, there was not sufficient evidence of hydrilla to warrant an application of chemical to treat the pond this year. The other measure taken was to spray for surface weed via a nontoxic product, and which was undertaken in August. There will be spraying in early summer 2025 for which a notice to property owners will be sent to refrain from lawn irrigation for a week's duration.

Chuck emphasized that the State of Maryland encourages buffer growth as a mechanism to reduce runoff into the Bay. One question is whether property owners could have sediment reduction, to which he responded that the permitting process is very expensive for anyone who wishes to pursue the issue. Overall, he said that the health of the pond is good, given that the pond's depth is greater than for comparable ponds such as Schumaker and Coulbourne Mill.

Chuck emphasized that the pond's health is affected by a number of factors, including drought and storms and that any spraying to be done always is guided by weed growth and an effort to balance weed growth with recreational uses of the pond. Chestnut Hill resident Eric Remian asked about algae blooms and whether the weed control program took algae growth into consideration. Chuck responded that it has not been done before and has not heard of any plans to begin treating algae growth at this time. The basis for this decision is that the County does not have the budget or human resources to tackle invasive species in the uplands and on the water.

Danwood resident John Rue raised the question of how Leonard Mill Pond is regulated. He said that the Maryland Department of the Environment does not consider Leonard Mill Pond as a non-tidal wetland, and as such, this complicates the question of weed treatment in terms of environmental conservation.

Chestnut Hill resident Mark Haverland asked about what procedure should be addressed for the removal of sediment in congested areas. Chuck indicated that the first instance would be through the Maryland Department of the Environment, and that a permit would require application by County Parks and Recreation, the owner of the pond. Chuck stated that property borders are in flux due to climate changes, and that the pond is experiencing a gradual filling in due to erosion.

In terms of aquatic life, it has been pointed out that when the pond experiences a drawdown, it tends to kill off the exposed mollusk population. Chuck noted this and pointed out that unless there were exceptional circumstances, no drawdowns have been undertaken precisely for that reason.

County Parks and Recreation is preparing to solicit bids for design engineering of an upgrade to the County boat launch adjacent to the Tourist Center. Two grants are part of the process. The first is for the design engineering. The second is for construction. Through state grants, the design engineering is expected to be completed by the end of summer of 2025 and that construction would be undertaken for opening in 2026. At this point, two firms are under consideration, namely, DMB (Davis, Bowen and Friedel), and GBM (George Miles and Buhr).

These two firms have been vetted by the State and have been approved by County Parks and Recreation. When a plan has been approved, there will be a public input hearing. No plans for a pond drawdown are expected, with work to be undertaken through a temporary coffer dam. Special measures will be undertaken to address the concerns of boaters and kayakers. At present, additional signage will be installed to warn boaters of the cement drop-off of the present launch site.

Residents have expressed interest and concern over tracking fish species in the pond. The State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) undertakes

periodic surveys. Interested residents. If made available, it will be shared with pond residents.

Michael Svaby, County Public Works

Michael began by emphasizing that a survey of the current dam indicates no imminent structural risks of collapse. At the same time, there has been shifting of sediment which affects the structural walls and the sluice gates. The gates are now operating imperfectly, with only one at operational capacity while the other two are frozen closed. The one that is operational has some leaks due to settlement shifting.

Mike pointed to efforts to coordinate an upgrade of the gates will be undertaken in tandem with efforts to upgrade the boat launch. If a variable gate is to be part of an upgraded sluice gate, one consideration is a sensor monitoring system. He emphasized a sanitary well with a float that can automatically adjust exactly by how much the sluice gates would need to open or close to maintain a stable water level. What County Roads would like to have is an electronic monitoring system that would send information in real time to the office from which gates would be adjusted accordingly.

Chestnut Hill resident Eric Remian suggested the creation of a community monitoring system until such time as an automatic monitoring system is in place. Other residents are willing to serve in a volunteer capacity to help County Roads with ongoing monitoring as upgrading is considered. Chuck Poole noted that such monitoring has been in place already, going back to when Mike's predecessor, Lee Outen, served in this manner for County Roads. As Mike emphasized, the goal is to have a more proactive system to contend with weather events that impinge directly on pond levels.

Some residents noted that invasive fish species such as the snakehead, have now been observed in Johnson's Lake (Pond). Given that the sluice gates are not able to close completely and that there appears to be no screen filtering, Leonard Mill Pond is at risk of a snakehead invasion. While the planned upgrading of both the boat launch and the sluice gate system is now in the design phase, at this point there is no immediate response mechanism to contend with migrating snakehead fish. Mike emphasized that the design phase of engineering now under consideration is expected to anticipate how invasive species can be prevented from spreading into the pond.

Chestnut Hill resident Cindy Olney expressed concern as to how a major disaster such as has taken place in Asheville, North Carolina, could be avoided in the event of a catastrophic failure of the Leonard Mill dam. Mike responded that even with the assessment of a low level of risk, the County, and the State, would undertake as rapid a response to any such event were it to occur.

Danwood resident John Rue pointed out to the development pressures on the pond that are threatening the unique ecosystem it embodies. Mike emphasized that the Department of Environment would be evaluating each and every step of upgrading to be taking place, even though the County has not had the jurisdiction to address the overall status of the pond environment.

LMPC related business

Laura Soper spoke briefly about her role as Senior Tourism Specialist, on her responsibilities at the County. She emphasized that Tourism could possibly develop a role to promote more tourism on the pond.

One resident observed concern over how the newly acquired city property on the south side has posed a risk of further environmental risks to the pond. John Rue recalled that a development Philadelphia firm, Pentex, persuaded the City of Salisbury to annex the property and then spearheaded the development of the properties facilitated the construction of Panera Bread, and now the ongoing construction for Ripieno's restaurant, of 3205 Philadelphia Avenue in Ocean City, Md. Rumors have circulated that Ripieno's plans for construction of a dock from which gondola tours would be undertaken. John noted that while Pentex promised to respect the buffer clearance for developers, the reality is that both Panera and now Ripieno's have built right up to the edge of the pond, in contrast to the stated declarations in the plan.

John Rue stated that he has tracked over the years how both residential and now commercial development in and around the pond has threatened the local ecosystem. He has offered to share documentation to those interested in learning more, and to meet with residents and in anticipation of further action to address the evolving record.

Phillip LeBel noted that the current balance of the LMPC account stands at \$9,290.05, as reported by current volunteer treasurer, Marilyn Booth. At this meeting, Marilyn had decided to step down after years of service. She was

thanked for her exceptional efforts to collect self-assessed funding from residents for chemical treatment of weeds on the pond until the County agreed to fully underwrite the permitting and treatment process. Marilyn turned over the accounts for transfer to Chestnut Hill resident Donna Cooper, who has been the authorized co-signer on the account. Donna was unable to attend the meeting and so will receive the documents as part of the transfer process at another time.

In response to an offer to step down, attendees asked Phillip LeBel to agree to serve another year as LMPC Volunteer Coordinator, based on consensus of those in attendance.

John Rue proposed that with County Parks and Recreation approval, interested residents could meet with him at the Tourist Center to discuss information he has gathered and to consider potential action going forward. He noted the clear-cutting of timber on Stage Road that has opened the region to greater highway noise and additional runoff risks to Leonard Mill Pond. He has proposed a three-hour meeting at the Tourist Center to share what he has documented. Additional details will be shared soon.

As part of the general conversation, John Rue shared information regarding a November 7 meeting to be held to discuss the expansion of a natural gas pipeline that may bear on the pond ecosystem. Information will be shared for public input as it becomes available.

In closing, one additional step to consider is the drafting of a mission statement for the LMPC. The original mission was to gather critical funding for weed treatment while more recently there has been growing concern over the expanding clear cutting around the edges of the pond and what may be a role that can be played to mitigate adverse effects and conserve the pond in a sustainable fashion.

One final note is an alert about what residents can do to restrain the growth of Canadian geese on the pond. As any observer can note, when the geese population expands, they displace the space for ducks and other species. Since the geese are considered a protected species, what neighbors can do is to remove the eggs from nesting geese in a way that can promote a greater balance of waterfowl species on the pond and its surrounding environment.

Phillip LeBel, LMPC Volunteer Coordinator

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