



GREEN VALLEYS ASSOCIATION AT WELKINWEIR

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KEEPING THE STREAM CLEAR - State officials say they plan to finally act on a 2005 petition to protect Pickering Creek.

By Walter F. Naedele - *Inquirer* Staff Writer

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It still seems like 1948, or even 1928, out on pieces of Pickering Creek in northern Chester County.

Walk into the woods, on Pickering Road off Route 113 in East Pikeland Township, and the shallow stream rushes past thick and clear.

Nature undisturbed.

In rapidly developing Chester County, it may seem an oasis, or a mirage.

Now, state officials say they expect to act, by the end of the year, on a 2005 petition to better protect the Pickering Creek watershed.

In a May 23 letter, State Sen. Andrew E. Dinniman (D., Chester) asked Kathleen A. McGinty, secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, to act on the three-year-old petition by the Green Valleys Association.

In an interview this month, Dinniman said that "I was told [by DEP officials] that the studies will be completed over the summer," and that McGinty will make a recommendation "before the year ends."

"I am very optimistic," he added. A DEP spokeswoman said Dinniman's end-of-year time frame "seems correct."

Dinniman pointed out that "my letter had nothing to do with construction in the watershed, but to make sure that this very valuable resource in this county is maintained."

Because the creek flows into the Pickering Reservoir, the senator said the designation would assure that a developer "has to be responsible, has to have a storm water plan that will maintain, not denigrate, the quality of the water."

In a separate interview, Ronald Bailey, director of the county planning commission, said, "the effect on developers is probably minimal."

"They're marching north," John F. Hoekstra said of construction crews. "This is the next watershed, in the direct line of fire."

The obvious threat to the Pickering, he said as he stood on that time-stopped-still stream bank off Pickering Road, is "the continuous suburban sprawl."

Hoekstra is director of watershed advocacy for the Green Valleys Association in East Nantmeal.





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Around the headwaters of the Pickering in Uchlan and Upper Uchlan townships, he said, "there has been quite a bit of development."

But the middle section of the watershed where he stood that day "still has that rural character - large properties and wooded areas - until the outskirts of . . . Phoenixville."

It was Hoekstra's private nonprofit agency that sent the Jan. 26, 2005, petition to DEP's Environmental Quality Board "to upgrade the Pickering Creek Watershed from high quality to exceptional value."

The "exceptional value" status would allow a legal challenge against future DEP approval "of discharges of lesser quality [such as stormwater or wastewater] than what currently exists" in the watershed, Hoekstra said. The current "high quality" status doesn't have that safeguard.

DEP spokeswoman Susan Rickens agreed that "exceptional value" waterways have stronger protection.

"There is something called the social-economic justification for discharge," she said, "that would allow lowering the water quality in a 'high quality' stream.

"That exception is not there for 'exceptional value' waters."

The 2005 petition was not meant as a speed bump on the road to further Chester County construction.

"It has nothing to do with development," Hoekstra said. "It has to do with what is the quality of the resource" - the watershed.

The "exceptional value" designation, he said, "doesn't slow anything down, doesn't stop" development.

"It's just making sure that whatever permits are issued in that watershed meet the water quality that currently is there."

And Hoekstra emphasized: "This has not been precipitated by any housing development."

The Pickering watershed covers parts of seven townships - Charlestown, East Pikeland, Schuylkill, West Pikeland, West Vincent, Uwchlan and Upper Uwchlan. Running west to east, it feeds Pickering Reservoir near Phoenixville.

Four of those townships were among 96 entities and individuals whose support was cited in the 2005 petition; three were not.

West Pikeland, Uwchlan and Upper Uwchlan sent an April 18, 2005, letter to the Environmental



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Quality Board calling the upgrade "unwarranted and unjustified."

But after the West Pikeland board expanded from three to five members this year, a majority came out in favor of the petition in an April 8 letter to McGinty.

It was not unanimous. Board member William Cracas said in an interview that though he opposes the change, "we're not talking about clean water or not . . .

"I really believe that local control does a better job more efficiently," than does the state.

"In fact," Cracas said, since the Pickering became a "high quality" stream, "we have raised the level using our resources to give it the quality necessary to become 'exceptional value.' "

If the DEP process goes forward, one of the steps will be a public hearing where critics and supporters of the measure will have their say.

When asked for comment about the petition drive, Michael McGee, executive vice president of the 450-member Home Builders Association of Chester and Delaware Counties, said, "people have to realize that there are economic impacts and consequences that could increase the cost of housing. And we all know that affordable work-force housing has been a problem in the county."

