

Trail could be too far off the beaten path

Property owners, school, preserved land could hinder project

BY JANE MEGGITT Staff Writer

UPPER FREEHOLD - After several years of preparation, a final report on the Doctors Creek trail feasibility study is complete. Now, the question is whether local governing bodies will accept all or part of the report's findings.

The Crosswicks Creek/Doctors Creek (CCDC) Greenway Group consists of appointed members from 12 towns in Monmouth, Mercer and Ocean counties, including Millstone, Upper Freehold, Allentown, Washington Township, Hamilton and Plumsted, which are all part of the Crosswicks Watershed. The group has been meeting since 2001 and in October 2004 received the Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions (ANJEC) Environmental Achievement Award.

Walter Helfrecht, one of the Upper Freehold representatives in the group, explained that the group's feasibility study came as a result of its Greenway Plan, which contains recommendations for further greenway, trail and blueway (water travel courses) development in the Crosswicks Watershed area.

The Greenway Plan suggests the creation of the Doctors Creek to Assunpink Trail as a portion of the Capital to the Coast Trail network, which connects the Delaware Valley to the Jersey Shore.

Helfrecht said that the feasibility study's main concern is whether that trail, more than 20 miles in length, might be possible along the Doctors Creek from Millstone to Hamilton.

The Doctors Creek headwaters begin at the Assunpink Wildlife Management Area in Millstone and travel through the northern portion of Upper Freehold into Conine's Mill Pond in Allentown. After dropping about 15 feet at the Main Street bridge, the creek continues around the southern boundary of Heritage Park in Allentown and then flows under Route 524 into Hamilton Township where it joins Crosswicks Creek, roughly one-half mile past the Groveville section of Hamilton, according to Helfrecht.

Helfrecht said that for area residents it is important to note that the Doctors Creek runs adjacent to the Upper Freehold Regional School District's (UFRSD) new middle school site on Breza Road. He said that the creek is the body of water that carries processed effluent away from both the Allentown water company and the Allentown Borough sewerage plant.

"Water quality concerns in this area are quite magnified due to the age of the infrastructure of those two utilities," Helfrecht said.

During the feasibility study, the Greenway Group contacted property owners whose land immediately adjoins the creek on both the north and south sides. Helfrecht said the group tried to determine the level of interest property owners have in dedicating easements for the construction of a trail.

"Generally, the public shies away from immediately saying yes to trail easements because they have preconceived notions about liability issues, privacy issues, trash accumulation issues, security issues, and the like," he said. Helfrecht said that the Greenway Group has seen documented proof that these fears are hardly ever warranted and that skeptics often become outspoken supporters of such trails.

In Upper Freehold, a number of farms - many of which are permanently preserved as farmland - adjoin Doctors Creek. These properties could present a problem for the implementation of the trail, according to Helfrecht.

"Unfortunately, once the preservation has been established, it is not possible to go back and make easements on the preserved property," Helfrecht said. "[A trail easement] must be done at the same time as the original preservation work and be included in the deed with the preservation restrictions."

Helfrecht said that there are still several farms along the creek with owners who have not yet entered a preservation program or put up harsh objections to the trail.

"The Greenway Group would need to reach out more to those owners, educate them to a certain comfort level regarding trail easements, etc., and then help the property owner in whatever way possible to construct the easement," he said.

A trail along Doctors Creek would benefit the township and its residents in many ways, according to Helfrecht. He said the trail would offer varied recreation activities that do not rely on large areas of land, which have to be maintained.

"There would be maintenance of a different sort, of course, and that would only serve to improve the usefulness of the Doctors Creek for everyone," he said.

The trail would also help preserve a large, contiguous open space along the creek, which he said would provide habitat for wildlife, help buffer the creek corridor and preserve the rural feel of the area. The trail would also provide interconnection with other trails and scenic byways that exist in the area, according to Helfrecht.

The location of Upper Freehold's new middle school on Breza Road could hinder the group's plan, according to Marc Covitz, the other Upper Freehold representative in the Greenway Group.

"If the school was either moved to the back and center of the current tract or put on Breza and Potts roads," he said, "it would be much better for the environment and the health of Doctors Creek and would be more in concert with the Doctors Creek to Assunpink Creek Trail Plan and the overall Crosswicks Creek/Doctors Creek [Watershed] Greenway Plan."

Helfrecht called the Greenway Plan and the feasibility study "important devices" Upper Freehold can use to support the conservation and open space element of its master plan, which regulates land use in the community.

The Greenway Plan also cites several north-south trails in various stages in Upper Freehold, according to Helfrecht. The Robbinsville to Walnford Trail, which is still in the planning stages, would follow Indian Run from Robbinsville into Allentown where it would join up with the proposed Doctors Creek trail and then connect to the existing trail around Heritage Park, where it would cross Route 524 along the Mark Harbourt Soccer Fields to connect to Byron Johnson Park and the school campus. The trail would then continue on Ellisdale Road to Polhemustown Road, near Princeton Nurseries, where it would turn along Walnford Road by the Peacefields Inn to end at Historic Walnford's back entrance.

The second trail mentioned in the Greenway Plan is an existing north-south trail in Upper Freehold called the Monmouth County Union Transportation Trail. Situated in a Jersey Central Power & Light (JCP&L) Co. right-of-way, and owned by the Monmouth County Park System, the trail follows the bed of a railroad that once ran between Millstone Township and the Route 537 border of Monmouth and Ocean counties, he said.

"While this right-of-way is intact for most of its length, there is a disagreement existing in the Davis Station Road section [for] about three-fifths of a mile, as to ownership, utilization, authorization and adverse

possession," he said. "A number of folks in Upper Freehold who like to ride equestrian trails have used this right-of-way in its current state but are stymied when they get to the Davis Station Road section."

He said the feasibility study may help end the dispute. The east-west Doctors Creek to Assunpink Trail would intersect with the Union Transportation Trail in the area under dispute, Helfrecht said.

"It could be that the feasibility study report would be the thing that gets that disagreement resolved once and for all," he said. "Hopefully, in favor of a public-use equestrian/hiking trail."

Helfrecht said the Greenway Group expects to give presentations on the report to the Upper Freehold Township Committee and Planning Board. The final report is available at <http://www.ccdcgreenway.org>.

[NOTE: The above is essentially an intact version of the original article published in the September 7, 2007 issue of the Examiner. In this version, there have been corrections made that re-instate the sense of the article near the end. Something got mangled in the article's layout and parts of sentences were displaced rendering the line of thought useless. -wh]