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Ten Mile Creek – Can we really save our ‘last, best stream?’

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Ten Mile Creek meanders through upper Montgomery County, joining two sister streams in Little Seneca Reservoir. Teeming with life, beautiful and threatened, it has become the focal point of a land use plan begun 20 years ago. A Master Plan that has been controversial from the beginning, stumbling through a piecemeal development process fraught with scandal and intentions still unrealized. People moved to Clarksburg thinking a town would grow around them. Instead the Town Center site is a vast moonscape re-sprouting trees from scruffy manmade hillocks.

Also in 1994, mandated under the Federal Clean Water Act, Montgomery County started a water quality monitoring program. We hired biologists and began to look into the health of our more than 1,500 miles of open streams. We discovered that the most degraded streams were found in older neighborhoods when the effects of storm runoff was still unknown. Over time, millions of gallons of sediment laden water washed into our streams, flowed to rivers and on to the Chesapeake Bay. Sediment consists of particles of earth mixed with chemicals from substances like fertilizers, insecticides, oil, grease and salt from roads. Over time, sediment scours stream banks, creating more sediment. It suffocates gill breathing organisms that live in streams. It pollutes our drinking water with toxic chemicals.

After 20 years of monitoring, Montgomery County has enough data to rate our streams by their health. Some are dead, many are in poor condition, some are fair to good. But only one is of the highest caliber we can find. Excellent. It is Ten Mile Creek. Now it has become a rallying cry for clean drinking water and sound land use decisions based on respect for our living waters instead of profit and expediency. It has brought local and regional scientists to the County Council to discuss, in dizzying detail, the mechanics of subwatersheds and the interconnectedness of natural systems. It all comes down to pavement. Impervious surfaces are roads, parking lots, rooftops, driveways. Any surface that does not allow water to soak into the ground. The more imperviousness, the more run-off, sediment and pollution.

Even in 1994, the Clarksburg Master Plan crafters knew Ten Mile Creek was special and inserted stages of development with triggers to be met before moving forward. Stage IV development in Ten Mile Creek was contingent on review of what has already occurred in surrounding streams and evaluation of how water quality has been and would be degraded by continued development. During the same 20 years, sediment and stormwater treatments have been engineered and used to cut down on stormwater pollution throughout the County. To varying degrees, these help but are they enough to protect a high quality stream in a part of the County resplendent with very steep slopes and fragile soils that easily crumble? Scientists and planners have stated that even new Environmental Site Design (ESD) measures are not enough to prevent damage from development intended for Clarksburg. If we can't be sure, we shouldn't depend on any stormwater controls

and/or ESD, no matter how state-of-the-art they may be. Are we willing to risk losing Ten Mile Creek and all it represents by reliance on them?

For more than three years, a Ten Mile Creek Limited Master Plan Amendment has been underway. The Planning Commission hired consultants, studies were completed. Staff made recommendations to limit development in the watershed. The Planning Board made a decision that allowed more than the staff thought wise. Now it is the County Council's turn. As the Amendment has moved through government processes, an unprecedented movement has grown around it. The Save Ten Mile Creek Coalition is now over 30 organizations. It encompasses environmentalists, civic activists, faith based groups, labor, student and multi cultural organizations. It has reached across political boundaries, gathered former officials and educated both citizens and our legislators who are right now considering a legacy decision on this meandering stream.

Two County Council joint committees meeting in long work sessions over the past two months have come up with a proposed compromise. To their credit they brought in scientists and listened to evidence based on the sensitivity of subwatersheds. Their recommendation is to allow impervious limits of 6% on the most sensitive subwatershed property and 15% on each of the other two. The decision the full Council must make is on a land use plan and the dangers they face legally are considerable. They cannot deny property owners use of their land. Unless the County can buy the subject properties in Ten Mile Creek or find another method to do so, they will experience some development. The Save Ten Mile Creek Coalition proposed such a package for consideration as well as lower impervious levels of 6-8-8% on subject properties. Scientists assure us the lower impervious levels remain, the better protection for water quality. Our current County Council did not discuss either of these alternative approaches.

But imperviousness isn't everything. Regardless of the limits chosen, the subwatersheds must have additional measures adopted including the widest possible forested buffers, supplemental reforestation, preservation of recharge areas (seeps, springs, ephemeral streams) and strict monitoring of sediment and erosion control measures at the limits of disturbance during construction. Without these mitigation criteria included, limiting impervious levels won't be enough.

In truth, we cannot be certain that anything on the table right now will ensure the long term health of this special stream. We can't live without water so can we really risk any of the watersheds leading to Little Seneca Reservoir, which we rely on as an emergency drinking water supply? Can we risk endangering the sole source aquifer so many Up County citizens depend upon? Scientists advising the Council called Ten Mile Creek "the jewel in the crown" of Montgomery County. We've already seen some decline in Ten Mile Creek from the development allowed to date. If you haven't been there, go soon. Remember and cherish what you find. Ask yourself: is it too much to ask that our last, best stream be assured a secure future so generations to come can know such a treasure?

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