



COUNTY OF DELAWARE

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Delaware County Moves to Create Largest County-Owned Park

County will acquire 213-acre property at Don Guanella site in Marple Township

Delaware County Council has begun the process of creating the largest County-owned park with the introduction of an ordinance to acquire the 213-acre parcel at the former Don Guanella School. The County's move comes after development of the site was unanimously rejected by the Marple Township Board of Commissioners twice in recent months. The County will secure the new park, which will provide immediate and ongoing substantial economic and environmental benefits as it improves County residents' quality of life, by paying fair market value as part of the process of eminent domain.

"We are enormously pleased that we will be able to secure one of the last large tracts of open space in densely populated eastern Delaware County for use as a public park," said Delaware County Council Chairman Brian Zidek. "Even prior to the COVID pandemic, we knew that open space – including parks, trails and bike paths – bring real economic and environmental benefit to our community and this park will dramatically improve our County's quality of life."

The new park will protect the site's extraordinary old growth forest and benefit all County residents, but particularly the approximate 14,000 who live within one mile of the property and the estimated 53,000 residents who live within a two-mile radius.

"For almost a decade, area residents have waited anxiously to see what was going to happen with the land at Don Guanella, especially since our community is nearly completely built out. Saving these amazing woods will be welcome news for everyone," said Richard Jones of Marple Township. "I know that everyone who enjoyed this natural space previously could not be happier that the County is going to secure this land permanently as a public park. It's the best possible outcome."

In addition to the substantial benefit the new park will bring to its nearest neighbors and the community at large, the preservation of open space will bring economic and environmental benefits as well. Studies confirm that preserved open space brings direct economic benefit in the form of tourism dollars, related employment, and nearby retail earnings as well as increased property values of surrounding properties.

Preservation of this land will also have meaningful environmental impact. Two important streams on the property serve as tributaries to the Darby Creek, which hosts important aquatic life and supports diverse wildlife habitat. Further, conservation of this land will prevent increased problematic flooding downstream, which degrades ecosystems and property values. The site's old growth forest will continue to improve the region's air quality, which was rated as extremely poor in recent American Lung Association "State of the Air" reports. Over 50,000 children and adults suffer from asthma in Delco.

“Over the past fifteen months, people in Delaware County have turned in unprecedented numbers to parks, trails, and preserves for solace and safe places to exercise,” said Oliver Bass, president of Natural Lands, a regional land conservancy headquartered in the county. “This desire to spend time in the outdoors demonstrates how vitally important preserved open spaces are to the wellbeing of local communities. The addition of Don Guanella to the County’s park system will expand recreational opportunities and preserve one of the largest remaining natural areas in the area.”

Council’s action comes shortly after a proposed development of the land into housing, retail, and institutional space and which would have required a majority of the site to be clear-cut of forest, was unanimously rejected for the second time by the Marple Township Board of Commissioners this spring. An earlier development proposal to develop the land into a mixed-use development with retail, residential, office and recreational spaces was similarly rejected by local elected officials in 2016.

“This decision shows that Delaware County is thinking about what it takes to be a place where people want to live and work,” said Councilmember Elaine Schaefer. “Public space doesn’t just protect our environment and create economic value, it builds stronger communities and will help Delaware County remain a place where people want to live, work and raise a family.”

The ordinance Council is introducing, if adopted, will allow the County to use Pennsylvania’s eminent domain law to take the property and pay “equitable just compensation” (a.k.a. fair market value) for it to the site owners. The ultimate price for the parcel will either be negotiated between the County and the owners or as determined by the County Board of View. If either party appeals the Board of View’s determination, the case will be determined in the Common Pleas Court of Delaware County via jury trial.

Based on an introduction of the ordinance this week and the requirements of the legislative process, the required Notice of Taking could be filed as soon as the latter half of July.

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