



MCCD MONTHLY

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Business concerns pushing stream upgrade off course

In 2005, members of the Monroe County Conservation District board voted to support a petition to upgrade Tunkhannock Creek's official designation to Exceptional Value waters. The district wrote a letter to the Environmental Quality Board expressing its support, noting that scientific data on the stream met the strict criteria set for such a designation.

Now it seems that the current board may be reversing course — not because the stream fails any test of purity (it still meets those strict criteria) but because the current board members appear to be swayed by business rather than conservation interests.

At the April district board meeting, a representative from Tunkhannock Township, George Ewald, who also works for Pocono Raceway, opposed the stream upgrade. Ewald said Tunkhannock Township officials opposed the upgrade in 2005 and continue to oppose it. They don't argue about the stream's purity, but instead suggest it that the upgrade does not consider potential effects on the real estate industry or other businesses.

Others argued otherwise. Ellen Lott of The Nature Conservancy stated they supported the EV petition and questioned the accuracy of some of the information presented by Tunkhannock Township. Abby Jones of PennFuture attended the meeting and maintained that environmental protection and economic growth are not mutually exclusive. Certainly, they have not been mutually exclusive in Monroe County. Development has occurred in areas of the McMichael Creek designated EV, and the sprawling Kalahari waterpark was built nearby the EV-designated Upper Swiftwater Creek. In fact, for years, Monroe County overall was Pennsylvania's second-fastest-growing county. This growth occurred largely without adverse impact on the water quality in our streams and rivers, bolstering Jones' position in support of the redesignation to Exceptional Value.

The board tabled the stream upgrade issue, moving it to the May 18 meeting agenda.

In other business, board members Heidi Secord and Mark Sincavage voted to add longtime district manager Craig Todd, now retired, as an associate director to MCCD. District board chairman Joe Hanyon and members Charlie Garris and Dave Moyer opposed the nomination, so the motion failed.

The district board did vote narrowly, 3-2, to support applying under PA Act 38 for funding to help Monroe County's farmers with nutrient management. Runoff from manure and fertilizers can reach — and damage — streams and waterways, and the district has been working for a long time to find ways to assist farmers. Secord, Sincavage and Hanyon voted for the Act 38 application. Moyer and Garris opposed it.

Pennsylvania's 66 county Conservation Districts are set up to ensure the wise use of the commonwealth's soil, water and other natural resources. District board members pledge to conserve these natural resources and to protect and restore the natural environment by helping farmers,

developers and other land users implement efficient, responsible conservation programs. Among these is the Nutrient Management Program. The MCCC's professional staff members are trained and prepared to carry out the nutrient management program with the assistance of the state Conservation Commission, which offers financial support and oversight when needed. Yet the Act 38 delegation agreement has appeared again on this Thursday's agenda (5/18/17).

Board members Paul Canevari and Pat Ross, who were both absent in April, are likely to attend this Thursday. Conservation District law says nothing about promoting economic development. But Ross has voted for economic development over conservation in the past.

And Ross and allied members may be seeking like-minded candidates to join them on the board. They are in the process of reviewing the organizations in Monroe County that recommend candidates for board membership. Will they add groups whose mission includes respect for natural resources, as described under the Pennsylvania Constitution, or groups that exist primarily to promote and facilitate economic development?

Meanwhile, the stream upgrade petition remains unresolved. Those long-ago members of the MCCC board recognized their responsibility under the law and supported the stream upgrade petition, which has taken all these years winding through the system. Current district board members have the opportunity to live up to their obligation to protect and conserve Monroe County's natural resources.

How will they vote this Thursday?

Attend the meeting, 8 a.m. May 18, at the district's offices on Running Valley Road, Bartonsville, to find out.