



MCCD MONTHLY

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By Paula Heeschen for Brodhead Watershed Association

Internal issues throw board out of balance

A board at odds with itself will find it hard to follow the institution's mission.

That situation has existed for some time at Monroe County Conservation District, charged by law to keep soil on the land and to protect water quality.

June's meeting proved no exception. Board members haggled again on an earlier decision on how best to represent the state's interest in curbing erosion from dirt and gravel roads. Monroe County stands to lose both funding and expert advice if the district reneges on its earlier vote to enter a formal agreement with the state Department of Environmental Protection on the Dirt and Gravel Road program.

Board member Heidi Secord, a farmer and often the board's sole conservation-minded representative, also challenged board President Joe Hanyon's letter to the secretary of the DEP on another, also disputed delegation agreement. The letter purported to come from the board, but, Secord pointed out, she had never seen it, and expressed concern that the DEP secretary might revoke the district's agreement with the agency.

DEP regional representative Shane Kleiner objected, too, noting that the letter suggested he, Kleiner, had failed to provide direction to board members.

"We sat here at two different meetings and went over all that," Kleiner said.

In fact, the development-minded Hanyon and board members Dave Moyer and Charlie Garris have often ignored or refuted the recommendations and guidance of their staff, from former District Manager Craig Todd to his replacement, Adam Schellhammer, and advisor/liaison Kleiner.

With Secord often their sole obstacle, Hanyon, Moyer and Garris also seem in no hurry to fill a vacancy created in May when Paul Canevari resigned this spring. They may well delay the process because the law calls on the county commissioners — Garris is one — to choose from board associate directors or from nominees named in the most recent round by designated nominating agencies. Associate members include, among others, Janet Weidensaul and John Leiser; the most recent nominee is former DM Todd. All have occasionally been at odds with the board majority.

So this majority may well drag its feet while it attempts to change even the constituency of the nominating groups themselves. At the June meeting, Garris proposed adding Pocono Mountain Municipal Airport as a nominating agency. An airport representative also attended a recent district meeting — to complain about district staff's efforts to uphold conservation law.

As Kleiner pointed out, the state must approve any new nominating agencies. If the board fails to act in a timely fashion, Secord will find herself more and more often the lone representative of conservation on a board that exists to protect the natural resources that belong to every Pennsylvanian.

How does this happen? The erosion of news coverage of local government is a major factor. Newspaper resources have been gutted by monied interests, often leaving their vital watchdog role of holding public officials accountable to citizens. Luckily, a few vigilant residents have been attending district meetings. This week, they should attend not only the district meeting at 8 a.m. Thursday, but this Wednesday's Monroe County Commissioners' meeting, too. Todd has grown so frustrated by the board that he plans to challenge the commissioners to act promptly on filling the vacant seat.

"Commissioners have not acted as prescribed in Conservation District law," Todd said in a message to conservation-minded supporters. "For all who support governance in the public interest and a strong, relevant conservation district, this will be an important meeting to attend. Please spread the word."

The commissioners' meeting will be held at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday in Room 203 of the Monroe County Administrative Center, 1 Quaker Plaza, Stroudsburg.

The MCCD board meets at 8 a.m. Thursday at Kettle Creek Environmental Education Center, 8050 Running Valley Road, Bartonsville.