

MONROE COUNTY CONSERVATION DISTRICT
Board Meeting
July 20, 2023

The Monroe County Conservation District has referred a warehouse construction site in Mount Pocono to the state Department of Environmental Protection for enforcement.

The board was tight-lipped about the site, a former golf course along Route 940. According to the Boro and Towne News, a soil erosion control device failed. During a July 30 downpour, fast-falling rain overwhelmed the device and sent mud-laden stormwaters into the busy Five Points intersection in Mount Pocono. Several borough officials and the road crew responded, assisted by workers from the state Department of Transportation.

“That particular site will be on next month’s report,” District Manager Kristina Heaney said. While DEP is working to initiate compliance with erosion and sedimentation regulations, district officials are not at liberty to discuss the event.

The Mount Pocono site is just one of at least four warehouses/distribution centers proposed in Monroe County and under review by authorities, district engineers Drew Wagner and Michael Wilk said.

Heaney and board member Craig Todd noted that municipalities have numerous tools at their disposal to manage both where such large developments can go and how they can regulate them to minimize environmental impacts.

Roofs that span thousands of square feet, and the parking lots that surround them, create vast impervious surfaces that send stormwater seeking an outlet. If the projects are poorly designed or constructed, or simply during extreme rainfalls, stormwater can pour off the property, sending runoff across adjacent land and roadways and eventually into streams. Silt-laden stormwater harms fish and other aquatic life.

Heaney and Todd called these projects “a land use question.” The district’s role is limited; district staff review the plans to make sure they hew to state regulations and monitor construction if they’re approved.

But “There’s a public perception that department (DEP) permitting minimizes impacts,” Todd said. In fact, municipalities play a major role in curbing the potential for pollution events by deciding where and how such development can occur, Todd said.

Heaney complimented Coolbaugh Township for asserting “environmental rights” when it comes to how it’s managing development.

Municipalities, she pointed out, have the authority to require an environmental impact assessment, "which would include a more in-depth review That's not something the district can do."

"We're doing everything we can" to keep soil on-site and protect waterways, Heaney added. On another topic, Todd asked why there were so many Chapter 105 violations on the technical report. Pennsylvania's Chapter 105 General Permit program applies to a variety of permits, including those for installing small docks or boat landings, some farm activities, utility line crossings, residential construction in wetlands and others.

Many stem from residential construction, Heaney said. "People are buying (lots) ... sight unseen," including "lakeside properties" that are wetlands.

"I call it post-pandemic fallout," Resource Conservation Specialist John Motz said. "People became distrustful of government," moving forward on projects without undergoing required reviews or applications. Among the activities, even on small lots, were property owners creating ponds in exceptional value wetlands and doing other site work without oversight.

"People think they can do things and not get caught," Motz said.

"Everybody wants a pond," agreed Heaney.

However, the district is getting help now with homeowners associations, which want to avoid such problems and are doing more internal policing, Motz said. In many developments, the HOAs own the ponds or lakes, and want to have better control over docks and water access. "They're the folks actually calling in a lot of the complaints," Motz said, and they're looking for district help in rewriting their own internal rules with an eye toward protecting waterways and the community.

And, Heaney added, DEP and the Fish and Boat Commission are stepping up.

"Fish and Boat has become a huge partner for us," Heaney said. "Nothing gets compliance like a guy with a gun."

The board also:

- Approved advertising for and hiring an environmental education staff member to replace an employee who is leaving.
- Heard that this summer's Conservation Camp, with 21 campers, was "hugely successful," as was the recent Bug Fest, which drew more than 200. "We are seeing unprecedented numbers of visitors and programs," Heaney said.

To accommodate so many visitors, the district has adopted a scheduling format, so parking isn't a problem.

* Learned that Head Resource Conservationist Lori Kerrigan was attending a meeting of the state Soil Conservation Commission. Kerrigan and Todd were representing the county as delegates.

- Heard that the state Dirt and Gravel Roads annual maintenance workshop will be in Northeastern Pennsylvania this year, close to home for local municipalities that wish road workers to attend. Well maintained dirt and gravel roads last longer, and send less silt and other pollutants into streams and waterways,

The next board meeting will be at 10 a.m. Thursday, Aug. 17, at the district offices in Bartonsville and on Zoom.

Respectfully submitted,

Paula C. Heeschen