

DATE: March 1, 2021

TO: Parks and Recreation Authority (CRPR@crcog.net), Deb Nardone, Executive Director, ClearWater Conservancy (Deb@clearwaterconservancy.org), College Township Manager Adam Brumbaugh (abrumbaugh@collegetownship.org), State College Borough Council President Jesse L. Barlow (jbarlow@statecollegepa.us, boro@statecollegepa.us)

FROM: Resident-Voters of Centre Hills Village, Walnut Springs Lane, and Neighboring Communities

RE: THOMPSON WOODS PRESERVE - Concerns about Negative Impacts from the Proposed Aspen Heights Development

Cc: Centre Daily Times Executive Editor Jessica McAllister (jmcallister@centredaily.com), Mayor Ron Filippelli (mayor@statecollegepa.us), College Township Council Member Paul Takac (ptakac@collegetownship.org), College Township Executive Assistant (jsnyder@collegetownship.org), Resident-Voters of CHV and Neighboring Communities (listed below)

[Link to Electronic Version of this Memo](#)

***NOTE TO COLLEGE TOWNSHIP COUNCIL:** Please add this letter to the next College Township Council Agenda as well as the archive folder used by Council and Staff. Thanks!*

We, the residents of Centre Hills Village, Walnut Springs Lane, and neighboring communities, are first writing to thank you for your ongoing work in considering the impact of the Aspen Heights development plan on the Thompson Woods Preserve (TWP).

We are also writing to express concern about this impact, and to ask that you (1) err on the side of caution in considering what the TWP can and can't absorb by way of increased pedestrian and bicycle traffic (and related problems); and (2) require the **most effective** prevention and mitigation strategies as conditions for approving the Aspen Heights development plan.

We included a list of our specific concerns below. Below that is a list of possible solutions that make some sense to us. We recognize that we are not environmental experts, but we hope our input is valuable nonetheless.

BACKGROUND ON PERMITTED AND PROHIBITED USES OF TWP

As you know, the Thompson Woods Preserve was created by a Land Trust Acquisition Grant from the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) and that management of the preserve is governed by the 2003 Thompson Woods Preserve Management Plan

(attached). The TWP Management Plan states that, "because of its location in this urbanizing setting...this natural parcel of land is extremely vulnerable to perturbation and..disturbance" and stipulates that the preserve shall be used only for "passive outdoor activities," which it defines as activities that "minimize disturbance of natural plant and wildlife communities" (p.3).

The management plan provides examples of passive outdoor activities which include walking or hiking with restrained pets on designated trails and biking only on the Streamside trail.

The following are some of the activities specifically prohibited by the TWP Management Plan:

1. Disturbing the peace via loud talking or music
2. Possession, consumption, or depositing of alcoholic beverages
3. Camping
4. After-sunset usage
5. Smoking
6. Littering

The Management Plan further states that "no change of use...may occur without the written consent of DCNR" (p.2).

SPECIFIC PROBLEMS ABOUT WHICH RESIDENTS HAVE STRONG CONCERNS

1. Increase of prohibited activities, if TWP is accessible by residents of the Aspen Heights Development

Those of us who walk regularly in the preserve (and there are quite a few) routinely pick up discarded trash, encounter unrestrained dogs, and observe bike riders who are supposed to dismount and walk their bikes. We also observe people smoking, drinking, and using the preserve after dusk, all of which violate posted rules. We have even encountered an established and inhabited campsite that remained active for several weeks after a resident-voter called police to report it. Finally, campfires have been lit in the preserve and fireworks have been used in the preserve - these present a genuine danger of forest fires, especially during dry summer months, and a forest fire could destroy much of the preserve and perhaps adjacent homes as well. *We are concerned that these prohibited activities will only increase with a large number of transient student population living next door to TWP.*

2. Failure of enforcement agent(s) to appropriately monitor TWP for violations, if TWP is accessible by resident of the Aspen Heights Development

As several of us have already brought to your attention, there is already a serious problem with official rule enforcement in the Thompson Woods Preserve. At the current usage level, it seems to us that College Township has been unable to properly enforce the prohibited activities outlined in the Management Plan. *Therefore, we are very concerned that the substantial increase in foot/bike traffic that will result from housing a large number of young people at the former Hilltop site will further overwhelm the*

College Township's enforcement efforts. This is especially likely if the residents of the proposed development are given direct access to the preserve through a gate in the fence (to which we are strongly opposed) and if the preserve is advertised to prospective residents as an amenity or entitlement that accompanies residence at the development.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS (with varying degrees of support from residents)

1. Ample budgeting and planning for increased rules enforcement and maintenance for the preserve needs to be in place as a condition of approval of the Aspen Heights development plan. Rules enforcement and maintenance will need to be much better than they have been over the past few years if the development is to be approved.
2. The fence between the Aspen Heights Development and the preserve should be replaced with a stronger and taller fence and the existing gate should be completely removed so that residents of the development do not have access to the preserve except via the only approved access points already allowed and included in the Management Plan.
3. In addition to replacing the fence between the Aspen Heights development and the preserve, additional landscaping should be added along the fence that discourages or prohibits people from getting close enough to the fence to climb over it.
4. If residents of the proposed Aspen Heights development must have direct access to the TWP (and we hope this is not the case), then consider adding an access point and trail in a planned manner. Students living at the new development will likely look for the most direct way to walk and bike to downtown and campus. To have that occur along a wide and stable existing path where bikes are already permitted seems prudent. One idea (suggested by Tom Ertsgaard) is to create an access at the north end of the existing fence on the former Hilltop property, south of Thompson Run stream. The proposed new access trail would join the existing trail-system just east of the "Streamside Trail" and would take pedestrians or bikers out to University Drive and other points to continue their journey into town, with minimal impact to the park(s) and the neighborhoods. (NOTE: According to the TWP Management Plan, the Streamside Trail is the only trail on which biking is permitted.) If residents of the proposed Aspen Heights development must have direct access to the TWP (and, again, we prefer they do not), then being proactive about locating a new access/trail will help avoid the potential for students to climb the fence or worse, cut the fence, in their attempts to have more direct access to a direct route to downtown and campus.
 - a. Additional trail re-routing options are described in the attached documents, which were put together by Lauren Walters and by Michael Beck & Jodi Hakes.
5. Residents of the Aspen Heights Development (and the public) should be regularly informed that TWP is a *nature preserve*. It appears that many current TWP visitors do not understand the basic nature of TWP, thinking it is just a general park rather than a

protected nature preserve. Increased signage and other educational materials would help with this problem.

6. Presently, several organizations appear to have at least partial jurisdiction over TWP including College Township, State College Borough, Clearwater Conservancy, and perhaps CRPR. As a result, it is difficult for area residents to know exactly where to report problems, and who is responsible for solving them. A clearer and more direct line of responsibility needs to be established, advertised, and posted, so that problems can be effectively reported and solved.

Thank you so much for listening to our concerns. We appreciate your attention and look forward to discussing our concerns with you further.

Sincerely,

Resident-Voters of Centre Hills Village, Walnut Springs Lane and Neighboring Communities

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