

THE BUSINESS AT HAND

With Anne Richardson

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Crook Horn Creek brings out the crooked... and downright nasty

Just seven-tenths of a mile long and no wider than any old road that once housed a railroad bed, the pathway to Crook Horn Creek hardly appears controversial.

The rugged gravel road is pitted, full of holes and, especially when it's wet, difficult to navigate. It's not very inviting. Only the spectacular meadowlands visit at the end of the road makes the journey worthwhile.

Until last spring, before more than a hundred volunteers went out on a cold, blustery morning and removed tons of trash, concrete and other discarded debris, the roadway was not only rough, it was downright dirty and dangerous.

The cleanup brought out the best - and worst - in the community. Lauded are those who donated their time to brave the bitter cold, and for shame to those who chose to write nasty letters about the caring families involved and report the activity to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Why would anyone inquire as to whether their neighbors had the proper permits to remove debris from the wetlands unless they wanted to create controversy?

The sunset at Crook Horn Creek is a magnificent sight to behold, so precious, in fact, that neighbors in a few surrounding homes apparently don't want to share. They want to keep the area "pristine," which seems to mean free of children, bike riders and nature enthusiasts. A plan to improve the path and the area along the creek has sparked their ire.

Fueled by a few "Not in my Backyard" (NIMBY) neighbors, the controversy has exploded. Even by Ocean City standards, this one is very difficult to understand.

The opposition dubbed themselves "Friends of the Wetlands," claiming they don't want the precious wetlands areas and surrounded wildlife disturbed by humans who might want to enjoy and learn from it, on the off-chance that they might litter. Interestingly, the city's environmental commission, a group not known to give in to any project that would destroy the wetlands, whole-heartily supports the nature trail.

Years ago, a former city administration bandied about a three-phase plan to build a "Rails to Trails" type project that would pave the old railroad bed from 35th Street to 52nd Street through the wetlands. Like other similar projects across America, it would have been an effort to clean up a deteriorated railroad bed to provide natural recreation trails for bicyclists and walkers.

Sadly, it never came to fruition and will not ever see the light of day. There has been, however, an interest in paving the path to Crook Horn Creek and rebuilding a rickety, dangerous dock to allow space for people to sit and enjoy the view and wildlife, and a place to launch three kayaks. There was a more grandiose plan to build a gazebo for more peaceful viewing, but the current city administration backed down.

The fate of the Crook Horn Creek project rests in the hands of the DEP. State officials sat through hours of public comment on Sept. 4 where 23 spoke in favor, 23 spoke against. It's hard to imagine that the DEP does not approve it.

In the meantime, the vitriol continues. It's hard to remember an issue that has brought out more anger, even the unforgettable ipe debacle didn't generate this much heat. The Friends of the Wetlands launched a well-orchestrated campaign, spread the misinformation, told it big and told it often. They write voluminous amounts of letters to local newspapers, often repeating the same tired old arguments week after week. If someone voices support of the project, they go after them personally, with vicious disdain in hopes of eventually embarrassing, thus beating, the supporter into quiet submission.

I wrote a nice story about the spring cleanup, the e-mail

ambush I received in response was appalling. There were claims that Crook Horn Creek was just the beginning, that there would be hotdog stands and restaurants, amusement rides and mini-golf on the meadows, perhaps a boardwalk. I was blown away. They went after the mayor and the business administrator, every council member not on their side, and every person who ever supported it.

Taken down in the first round was Gail Ping, a friend to everyone, a community treasure. Despite the demands of three children, a husband, aging parents and a thriving hands-on business, Gail manages to find time to volunteer for everything good and wholesome that comes her way. She's the pillar of the annual After Prom extravaganza and a member of every group that supports local school children. Need help? Gail is there. She donates more of her time to local causes than anyone I've ever met.

Yet she was pilloried, roasted. Like a lamb going to slaughter, she was accused, among other things, of serving her own self-interest. She's given so much of herself to others and was treated like a criminal. She pulled back as others stepped up, and they too were barbecued like pigs on the spit.

"It's so absurd," said Ping. "We want to resurface the old railroad bed. The DEP will say yes or no. They are the experts. What makes this local group think that they have more information and are better educated than those who do this for a living? It comes down to NIMBY, and they won't come out and say it. They want to stop families from coming down and sitting on the dock and enjoying the beauty of the wetlands."

Ping says the tangent over the long-ago, discarded multi-phase plan has caused others to be misinformed.

"What has been presented to the DEP is very minimal," said Ping. "They are saying its acres and acres. It's only what is there now that is to be paved. They are not telling the truth."

"What I find most absurd is the way they attack people, no wonder no one wants to say anything," she added. "The DEP gave them an opportunity to speak, yet there they are in the paper, week after week, with the same thing. We put the facts out and they pretty much called us liars. They have crossed the line of decency. You can't argue with their untruths, hotdog stands, amusements? Please, like the DEP would approve that. Right. Yet certain people do start to listen."

Ping said she is frustrated by the endless claims the nature trail would disrupt the environment.

"We're trying to preserve and enjoy the environment," she said. "It's absurd to think that repaving this old road would upset the environment and stop turtles. There is concrete underneath there now. It's not like it hasn't been paved."

In fact, there were trains, beginning in the 1880s. The last train crossed the bay in 1980.

"They are so afraid that this is some kind of sham to go for the whole tamale, pave from 35th Street," said Ping. "Would I love to see a Rail Trail? Yes, but it's probably not going to happen in my lifetime. In this environment, it would be almost impossible. We're not even asking for that. It would be a great thing, trust me, I'd love to see the bikes off of West Avenue before there is a tragedy. It would be a great place to go see the birds and the meadows, yet they'll never let us have it."

Mayor Sal Perillo said the pathway provides the only opportunity for people to explore the wetlands.

"If you want to see it, this is it," he said. "You can't go anywhere else. The road is not very inviting. We want to make it an attractive area, we want it to look nice and give people an opportunity to explore. At the end of the road is a little beach, you can launch a kayak."

This week on Ann Richardson's business blog

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The Boardwalk substructure continues to generate controversy, check on the latest. Marshall Schmeizer is on the case with freedom of speech. Is 28 seconds a lot of time? Who is Dan, Dan the Spacklemán anyway? Turns out he's pretty nice guy. Drew Fasy is busy in Sea Isle, rentals were way up this year. Boyar's Market has delicious hot food offerings. One stop, and dinner is ready, thank you Gail. Looking to host a Halloween Party? Call Party Hoppers. Mark Reimet of Ocean City Financial Services and Jeff and John Shirik of Fortress Financial catch us up to speed on the latest with the market. The municipal golf course is looking great and Mayor Sal Perillo wants everyone to know what a great job city employees are doing down there. Perry Egan offers some fall tune-up specials. Stephanie Reese Goldman is doing a phenomenal job teaching children in South Carolina, and her test scores prove it. Check out who had the highest scores in the county. Thunderbolt Raceway is coming to Millville, find out why that's great for Ocean City.

The three-phase plan was a dream of long ago.

"That's not what is before us, not what's on the table," said Perillo. "This is different. This involves 192 square feet of wetlands, and we will mitigate them and replace them elsewhere. Think about that, 192 square feet, the size of a bedroom, yet we hear claims of acres and acres.

"I'm confident the DEP is going to say yes," he added. "The most disappointing thing is the tone of the dialogue. Those opposed have the right to get their point across, but I wish that we could deal with facts. Why be nasty? It doesn't need to be that way."

Tom Heist IV is another consummate volunteer, the first to open his checkbook to help a worthy cause or someone in need, and another battered warrior.

"They took half truths and distorted them," he said. "There was wording on the original application that had nothing to do with what we are dealing with now that was misleading and they took it and ran with it. They made it into something that it is not. They twisted everything to put fear into the public. They've tried to make people look bad. They say we're hiding something.

"The mayor is not lying to anyone, no one is lying," he added. "It's a shame this trail has caused so much divisiveness. So many people say it's a great thing, yet they're afraid to speak up. No wonder, you have to be prepared to be shot at, to take fire. I think this is good for the community, but I speak up knowing what's going to happen.

"The whole railroad thing is out of the question," he continued. "Would I love to see it? Absolutely. I will say that on the front page of your newspaper. Would it be a great thing? Yes, but the DEP would not approve it. The DEP wants to see bike trails, but this is not about that right now. No one is looking to kill turtles; we're looking to make a nice trail at Crook Horn Creek, that's all. We want a safe place to go outdoors, enjoy the sunshine and fresh air.

"We have two people trying to convince the whole town, slanting the information," he said. "I don't like being confrontational, but if you let a lie go unanswered, it's believed to be true. I just want to deal with the facts."

It's a nature trail enhancing and improving a blighted area. How sad it's torn apart a community. When the DEP approves the project, let's hope it brings healing and a nice spot for families to enjoy... turtles and sunsets.

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