

Saving the Chesapeake one waterway at a time: On proposed Snitz Creek restoration project

Opinion

Michael Schroeder

Lebanon Daily News

September 14, 2022

We begin this story where it ought to begin: along the severely eroding banks of Snitz Creek behind Lowe's on Quentin Road in North Cornwall Township. Hoop it across the field behind Lowe's down to Snitz Creek and you'll find a waterway choked with fallen trees, debris, and sediment, flowing in a channel much too wide for the volume of water that usually flows. Its banks are muddy and exposed, its streambed thick with silt and muck. With every rainstorm a pulse of sediment and agricultural pollutants flows from the banks of Snitz Creek downstream into Quittapahilla Creek, Swatara Creek, the Susquehanna River, and the Chesapeake Bay.

It is sections of waterways like this that cumulatively are "Killing the Chesapeake Bay" – the title of a hard-hitting series of investigative articles by a team of reporters led by Mike Argento published in February 2021 in the York Daily Record. More than 40 recent photographs documenting the conditions along this section of Snitz Creek can be viewed via this link: <https://tinyurl.com/y364ew3m>.

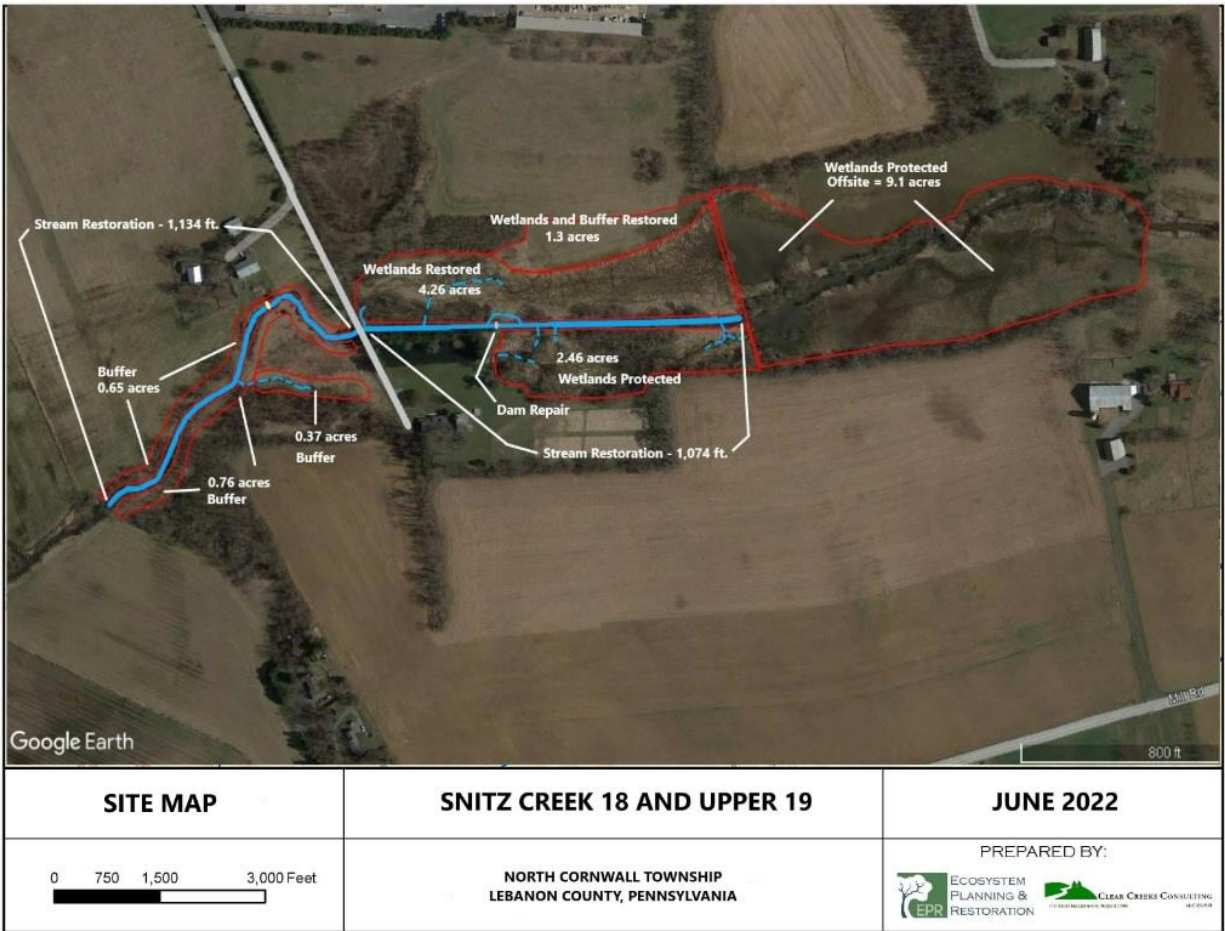
Keep those photos in your mind's eye, because that's where this story begins and ends: with the section of Snitz Creek behind Lowe's in need of major restoration work. Go see for yourself.

Now we turn to the Quittapahilla Watershed Association (QWA), an all-volunteer, non-profit, grassroots citizens' organization founded a quarter-century ago. The QWA's mission is "to improve the water quality of Quittapahilla Creek & its tributaries; to raise public awareness about the watershed's importance to the local quality of life and to the Chesapeake Bay watershed; and to encourage citizens, organizations & businesses in Lebanon County to help maintain the health & viability of the watershed's streams & ecosystems."

I've had the privilege of serving as QWA President for the past eight years. Our work is focused mainly on facilitating grant-funded projects to improve the water quality in the watershed – most grants coming from PA Department of Environmental Protection's (PA-DEP's) Growing Greener program and the federal Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Clean Water Act Section 319 funding.

To do this stream restoration work, we need the permission of property owners along sections targeted for restoration. That's one of our main jobs – contacting property owners, explaining the work we're proposing, and asking permission to access their property and do the work. It doesn't cost them anything, and once the work is completed, they don't need to do anything

except not disturb or destroy the “best management practices” (BMPs) that have been installed – like stabilized banks and a narrowed streambed, for instance.



*Site map with schematic overlay of proposed work on Snitz Creek 18 and Upper 19 in North Cornwall Township, prepared by Ecosystem Planning & Restoration and Clear Creeks Consulting, LLC. A sliver of the rear of the Lowe's store on Quentin Road appears at the very top of the image.
Michael Schroeder*

Most property owners are glad to see the work done because they see the need for it. Who wants a severely eroding waterway choked with muck and debris in their backyard?

Sometimes, property owners reach out to us to ask about fixing problems on the waterway next to their property. That happened in 2017, when a number of property owners along Snitz Creek near Lowe's got in touch to ask about restoring that section.

In response, the QWA, our partner, Doc Fritchey Trout Unlimited and the company we work with that does the design and permitting work and manages the projects, Clear Creeks Consulting, LLC, developed a grant proposal to address the severe erosion along this section of

Snitz Creek. We call it “Snitz Creek 18 and Upper 19 Stream and Floodplain Restoration Project, or “Snitz 18-19” for short.

The project’s proposed BMPs included, among other things, removal of multiple fallen trees and debris jams, streambank stabilization, repair of a failing dam, and repair of eroding gullies that are endangering an extensive wetland system and riparian buffer along the floodplain at the rear of Lowe’s and on the property immediately upstream. This area can never be developed because it is a FEMA-designated floodplain. This is but one of several projects we are working on to address problems along Snitz Creek.

The deadline for the 2022 round of PA-DEP Growing Greener grants was June 24. By mid-June, we had secured the permission (oral or written) of four of the five property owners for our Snitz 18-19 proposal. We tried hard to get the permission of the company that manages the property where Lowe’s sits – the Manhattan-based National Realty & Development Corporation (NRDC).

After a long series of emails and phone calls, on the afternoon of June 21 – three days before the deadline – NRDC abruptly announced the property owners’ “final decision” not to sign onto the project. They offered no good reason for their refusal and indicated they wanted no further contact. This abrupt end to our cordial and seemingly productive discussions was unfortunate and frustrating.

The QWA’s regular monthly meeting was at 7 p.m. that same day, June 21, only a few hours after the NRDC announced the property owners’ “final decision” not to sign on. At that meeting, we reached consensus that we would try to get the project unstuck by contacting Lowe’s directly to let them know about the lack of cooperation we had received from the property owners and their manager. We hoped that Lowe’s would step up as a responsible member of the community and convince NRDC and the property owners to agree to the project. However, we also gave both companies a courtesy heads-up that if the property owners continued to refuse to discuss the project, or until they offered a reasonable explanation for their refusal, we would let Lowe’s customers know about it using social media, press releases, and peaceful demonstrations in public spaces near the store.

We made very clear that we hoped to avoid such an outcome. “We are reluctant to undertake these steps,” we wrote to the NRDC, “but we feel that your corporation’s refusal to agree to this project leaves us no choice. Our goal here is not to get in a fight with you, or with your clients, or with Lowe’s. Our only goal is to restore the section of Snitz Creek behind Lowe’s. I am confident we can do that and protect the legitimate property interests of you and your clients and Lowe’s. But we can only do so if we re-engage in conversation and negotiation.”

And that’s where things stood before the Sept. 6 public meeting in North Cornwall Township, when Supervisor Sam Abram angrily denounced me and the QWA’s “threat” of speaking out against the landowner and Lowe’s as “morally reprehensible.”

To repeat: our goal is not to get in a fight with the landowner, Lowe's, or anyone else. Our goal is to work collaboratively with all the landowners whose properties are being impacted by the currently degraded conditions, to restore and protect the water quality and aquatic resources along this section of Snitz Creek, and to contribute to the broader effort to reduce the flow of sediment and other pollutants to the Chesapeake Bay.

To the property owners, the NRDC, and Lowe's: Please do not let this unfortunate incident prevent us from working with you and your neighbors in resolving the problems affecting your property and theirs. We implore you to reconsider your participation in this much-needed project. Look again at the photos of the creek's exposed, eroding banks and its too-wide, debris laden, sediment-choked channel. Take a walk behind Lowe's to see for yourself. Then let us fix it. It won't cost you a nickel, and your property and interests will not be negatively impacted in any way.

Please.

Michael Schroeder is president of the Quittapahilla Watershed Association.

© Lebanon Daily News

This story was published online by the Lebanon Daily News, at
<https://www.ldnews.com/story/opinion/2022/09/14/on-proposed-snitz-creek-restoration-project/69493765007/>