

# Natural area's road issue debated

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WEST GOSHEN — Controversy continues to swirl around the issue of a road through the Robert B. Gordon Natural Area, a 67-acre preserve that West Chester University faculty members say is not a preserve in the sense that it is protected.

The WCU Environmental Council, a faculty-based university committee that advises the administration on environmental issues, has pressed the university to permanently protect it by putting a conservation easement on the land.

The council also recommends that the univer

sity add adjacent forest and open space to the natural area and officially declare that the university doesn't support putting a road through it.

The current road is used by joggers and walkers but is only open to vehicular traffic during stadium and commencement events.

"I believe the WCU administration should make an official policy that there shouldn't be any expansion of the existing road and no new road," said Harry Tiebout, a professor in the biology department. He is a member of the environmental council and an administrator for the natural area.

The council made the recommendations to the administration of former WCU president Madeleine Wing Adler. Now that there is a new president, Greg Weisenstein, the council will be reviewing its recommendations with him.

"He seems to be very environmentally conscious. We're hoping the administration and president will be receptive and recognize the importance of the Gordon Natural Area and protect it in perpetuity," said Tiebout.

When the council's recommendations were first made a couple years ago, the administration was supportive, but said it wanted to hold off because it needed to get permits from West Goshen for the university's facilities plan.

The township has said it would like to see a road put through the natural area.

Township Supervisor Dr. Robert White brings it up every time the university is before the township with a land development plan, said Dee Giardina, executive director of WCU facilities design and construction.

The township would like to open up the road to vehicular traffic to alleviate congestion in the residential neighborhood of Roslyn below Rosedale Avenue.

Residents there have complained for years of cut-through traffic from people using their streets as another route from New Street to High Street. Last year the township added speed bumps on some of the roads to deter speeding students.

In fact, state Sen. Andy Dinniman, D-19th, of West Whiteland, has met twice with residents about this issue.

East Bradford, directly to the west of the WCU campus, is against constructing a road through the natural area.

In 2003, members of the West Chester Regional Planning Commission authorized a regional transportation feasibility and design study. The study focused on transportation planning issues in the south and southwest portion of the borough and north of the borough.

As part of the study, various scenarios were investigated including opening up the road in the natural area and connecting it to Tigie Road in East Bradford.

If this happened, it would create a whole new commuter route for people traveling on Route 52 who are trying to get to Route 202.

In a 2003 memo to the regional planning commission, East Bradford said it had no plans to improve Tigie Road which doesn't exist east of New Street.

Tigie Road is a local access township road that crosses through the township's Agricultural Security District and is designated as a scenic road in the Open Space, Recreation and Environmental Resources Plan, the memo said.

In an interview Thursday, East Bradford Township Manager Michael Lynch said the Board of Supervisors had not changed its position regarding being opposed to any extension of Tigie Road to connect to a road through the Gordon Natural Area.

In fact, on the official map of the township, which is a planning tool that describes future changes the township endorses, it shows Tigie Street ending in a cul-de-sac near New Street.

The road east of Tigie Road, which has been called a university access road, is now being named Stadium Road by the university.

While the transportation feasibility study examined various options for roads through the Gordon Natural Area, it eventually concluded that such a road "would cause significant natural and cultural resource impacts to the Robert B. Gordon Natural Area."

The study did not make the road one of its recommendations.

It described the natural area as a substantial and unique resource in the greater West Chester area with a large intact forest that creates significant wildlife habitat and contains a first-order stream which is a tributary to Plum Run.

The area has a total of 36 tree species including remnants of American chestnuts. Many of the trees are about 100 years old. There are diverse animal populations including the Northern dusky salamander, the Northern red salamander, the Northern two-lined salamander and the red-backed salamander.

Dwight McCawley, a resident of Mystery Lane, which is one of the streets near the Roslyn neighborhood that is sandwiched between the WCU north campus and south campus, walks through the Gordon Natural Area every day.

"It's great. I see birds, deer and fox. There are university classes that use it constantly. I see joggers, athletes. It's practically the only available area with trails in this vicinity. If you open the road to vehicles, all that would be ruined. For what, so that drivers could have one more road to whiz through?" said McCawley.

The Gordon Natural Area was set aside by the university's Board of Trustees in 1973 in honor of Earth Day. It was named after a biology department professor. For 36 years it has been an outdoor laboratory for students, biologists and ecologists affiliated with the university and local environmental groups.

While the natural area itself is about 67 acres, there are 68 acres that adjoin it that have never been dedicated. One is a 52-acre parcel just south of Stadium Road called the southeastern parcel. Another parcel is immediately north of Stadium Road. There is also open space land across New Street that is part of the student dorm project. If all that land was included in the Gordon Natural Area, it would be about 135 acres.

The administration has not actually come out and said its official position is that it is opposed to opening the road for public traffic.

In a 2006 letter to Gerry Hertel, another professor in the biology department and an administrator of the natural area, Adler expressed satisfaction that the authors of the transportation study had not recommended that the road be opened.

One of the recommendations of the WCU Environmental Council is that the university not use the Gordon Natural Area as part of its facilities plan.

In fact, when the student housing project in East Bradford was constructed, a stormwater management system was placed in the natural area.

Giardina said if the day came that all the municipalities surrounding the area including West Goshen, East Bradford, Westtown and the borough were in full agreement that they wanted the university to allow a road through the Gordon Natural Area, then the university might consider it.

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