



Heth's Run Watershed Walk

October 28, 2020

Route: Elgin Street and Negley Avenue near King Estate through Heth's Run Valley to Heth's Park returning via Heth's Avenue and walking back along Negley Avenue to Highland Park.

8 participants, including Deb Gross, City Council Representative for 7th District, which includes Highland Park and Morningside

Yasmeen Ariff-Sayed, community member and resident of Morningside

Erin Copeland, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, senior restoration ecologist

Deb Gross, Pittsburgh City Council representative, 7th District

Tom Hoffman, Clean Water Action, Our Water Campaign

James Murray, District 7 Council Office, Bloomfield resident

Arlene Sanderson, Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy, grant writer

Kate St. John, community member, blogger and naturalist

Heidi Wettlaufer, community member, park supporter, and resident of Morningside

Erin Copeland led this fifth and final watershed walk in a series that included: the 4-mile Run Watershed, 21st Street Watershed, Woods Run Watershed, and Middle Hill/Uptown Watershed. Erin explained staff changes at the Parks Conservancy; she'll be the main contact for Heth's Run now.

Erin introduced the walk explaining that each of these watersheds now has an organized task force modeled on the Negley Run Watershed Task Force, which was the first of its kind in the city. PWSA and ALCOSAN have participated in planning for the Negley Run Watershed. The watershed walks have been organized to give participants an on-the-ground view of the work that is being discussed by the watershed task forces and in community meetings primarily focused on stormwater management, green infrastructure, and the community benefits of a more holistic thinking about water.

The group convened at the corner of Elgin Street and Negley Run on the edge of Highland Park.

Erin introduced the walk and began by reviewing the history of planning for Heth's Run, which dates to 2005 and the Heth's Run Valley Project. She explained that the Heth's Run Task Force had expressed an interest in learning more about that early project, as well as addressing gaps in communication.

Erin stated that the Parks Conservancy is an advocate of adaptive management of storm water, which includes a combination of green infrastructure and the more traditional gray infrastructure (deep tunnel) approach typically favored by municipal sewer authorities like ALCOSAN.

Deb Gross, City Council representative for the 7th District and former PWSA Board member, explained that ALCOSAN is planning to expand the sewer's capacity through a deep tunnel on the opposite side of the Allegheny River. She said the solution should also include green infrastructure to reduce peak flow and retain water.

Tom referred to the recently released RAND Study of the Negley Run Watershed plan, which predicts large increases in rainfall in the Pittsburgh area and states that tunnels alone will not be able to handle the overflow from these events. He also said that PWSA recently sent out an RFP to update the Green First Plan asking for a Stormwater Master Plan. That general information is found [here](#).

Yasmeen pointed out that there is simply not enough community involvement in the discussions. She also supports advocating for more rain barrels. She said that it is difficult to find resources and expertise.

Deb said that the City and PWSA could do more to incentivize community efforts to control water using rain gardens and barrels.

The A41 Heth's Run sewershed plan is in the 2015 Green First Plan developed by PWSA. Its development is based on a thorough study of the sewershed by PWSA's consultants. The plan designates optimal locations for GI, found [here](#).

In addition, The City and PWSA are undertaking a stormwater code and review effort. AKRF is the chosen consulting firm working on the plan. During this past summer, Kara Smith (Principal Env Planner at the Department of City Planning) and James Stitt (Sustainability Coordinator at PWSA) presented the most recent updates to the Watershed Task Forces. This presentation can be found [here](#).

The group walked along Negley Avenue to Mellon Terrace where they entered the woods and walked along the trail that leading down to the Heth's Run stream valley. On the way, they passed the PWSA rising main project that will place a large pipe along the street to deliver water from the area near the zoo up Bunkerhill to the Highland Park reservoir.

Erin returned to the discussion of the Heth's Run Valley project explaining that in 2017, a concept plan was almost completed for Heth's Run. The zoo is within Highland Park and occupies land leased from the city. The zoo's leadership wants to expand the parking lot, but the city has held firm. Expanded parking interferes with the Heth's Run plan and the additional impervious surface would only lead to increased stormwater challenges.

The Heth's Run Valley project addressed several needs. The first phase of the project was the construction of a new bridge over the run, which has been completed. The costly but state-funded project required considerable effort and political will. Future phases of the plan will connect the run to the river, provide additional points of access to the stream valley, and create two main trails through the valley.

A field study by the City leading up to the plan documented a lack of rectangular playing fields for public use. A field is part of the plan and will improve facilities for the many soccer leagues in the city.

The plan also addresses conveying water through the two valleys out to the overlook and down to the river.

Deb said the plan would propose bringing additional paths from other neighborhoods to improve connectivity.

Overall, the idea is that the City needs additional fields, trails and ways to promote human connections, water connections and access to the river at the same time the zoo parking needs are addressed. The zoo recently secured a \$450,000 grant for parking lot improvements.

Yasmeen was concerned that the zoo simply wants more space for parking.

Gross responded saying that she and the mayor are aligned and agree that there is no more space for parking. The zoo's early plans extended the parking lot almost to the Highland Park playground.

Erin said she is wondering if the zoo grant aligns with the plan for Heth's Run. Deb said she will request more information and an update on the use of the funding.

Deb said that the original valley was 80 feet below the existing roadway, but the process of filling the valley has reduced the elevation to 30 feet. Much of the fill that was used, however, is thought to be contaminated. Any stream construction will require that the stream be lined to prevent toxic seepage.

The walk continued allowing participants to view the stream valley behind the King Estate. There area has large shale outcroppings that are covered with moss. Erin mentioned that there are stands of witch hazel in the lower valley. Witch hazel is among the latest blooming native shrubs in this area.

The group crossed the slope above the stream valley and walked up to King Street. They continued through the neighborhood to Hampton, which marks the upper edge of Heth's Run Valley.

At Heth's Park, the group turned, walking back through the park to take in the view over the stream valley. The area that is now park land was created by fill.

The plan includes a new trail that is formed by connecting the trail from Heth's Valley to the King Estate valley trail. The two trails will come together at a spot above the zoo parking lot.

The concept plan was never fully finished. Deb said that completion of the plan needs additional funding. She encouraged members of the group to testify before City Council asking for funding to complete the plan. She said an additional \$70,000 is needed to move the plan from concept to the construction drawing stage.

Erin emphasized, as was found in RAND's research brief entitled How can green infrastructure help to manage rainfall in an urban watershed, found [here](#), that the benefits of investing in green infrastructure in the Negley Run Watershed far exceed the cost of projects. Green Infrastructure creates jobs, especially long-term maintenance jobs. There is a tendency to calculate outcomes based only on infrastructure rather than infrastructure plus community benefit. A more holistic view is required.

Tom described the role of the proposed stormwater fee, which is based on usage. He said that fees based on water usage are unfair because corporations that contribute most of the water pollution to the sewer system pay the same amount as residential customers. For example, commercial roofs and parking lots collect water and send that water into the sewer system. PWSA

is currently drafting a proposed stormwater fee, like those enacted by municipalities elsewhere, that creates a more equitable system for distributing charges.

Deb said that PWSA is working to create a robust service plan that is income-based. For example, if you qualify for the energy fund, you will qualify for water use consideration.

Heidi pointed out the lack of coordination between PWSA and the gas company. She said that PWSA dug up the street to replace lead lines, and now the gas company has come back and is digging up the street again.

Deb said that privatization in Europe has not worked. She says that she is vehemently opposed to privatizing the water utility.

The group walked down Heth's Avenue noting that the street was once a streambed and the location of the headwaters of Heth's Run. A complete street plan that was proposed in the Green First Plan, for Heth's Avenue would adopt a green street concept and include rain gardens along the sides of the street.

The walk continued to the Highland Park apartment complex at Wellesley and Negley. The complex's large footprint and expansive lawn and roof area presents opportunities for green infrastructure installations. The Evolve design firm proposed a plan that used green roofs to help capture water and reduce the heat island effect.

As the walk neared its completion, Erin summarized further action:

- Participants expressed an interest in viewing the 2017 concept plan.
- More information is needed on community greening and how to advocate for the process.
- The recently released Rand study for the Negley Run Watershed will be shared.

Heidi offered to write letters. She said it is important to create a space for citizens' voices.

Erin mentioned that Councilwoman Gross spoke about the budget process, Gross directed participants to the upcoming budget hearings. On November 10th, the budget will be presented to the mayor, and public hearings will be held through the end of the year. A balanced budget must be passed by the end of December.

Deb reminded participants that on Tuesday and Wednesday, City Council takes public comment. People are allowed three minutes to speak on an issue that concerns them. Deb said that this is the best forum to advocate for projects. She encouraged participants to advocate for the Heth's Run Valley plan.