

**JOHN A. LAWRENCE**  
STATE REPRESENTATIVE  
13<sup>TH</sup> LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA  
HARRISBURG

**HARRISBURG OFFICE**  
P.O. BOX 202013  
HARRISBURG, PA 17120  
(717) 260-6117

**JENNERVILLE OFFICE**  
1 COMMERCE BLVD., SUITE 200  
WEST GROVE, PA 19390  
(610) 869-1602

Governor Josh Shapiro  
508 Main Capitol  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

January 16, 2023

Dear Governor Shapiro –

I write to ask you to redesignate the Big Elk Creek State Park as part of the White Clay Creek Preserve to protect a hundred years of preservation-minded actions by nature lovers, fox-hunters, and forward thinking individuals who foresaw the value of preserving open land.

Sixty years ago, DuPont corporation began acquiring property in Southern Chester County and New Castle County, Delaware with the intent of damming the White Clay Creek and constructing a reservoir to provide drinking water for the greater Newark, Delaware area. A twenty-year battle led by an incredible group of diverse individuals from both states came together and achieved the impossible – forcing DuPont to abandon their development plans. Rather than sell the acquired property for development, DuPont generously donated the acreage in 1984 to the states of Delaware and Pennsylvania to create a wilderness preserve. The White Clay Creek Preserve was carefully stewarded by a bi-state committee, and has been managed ever since as a wilderness area limited to low-impact, day-use recreational opportunities. It is the only state preserve under DCNR's management, and it has become a cornerstone of the Southern Chester County community.

In 1975, just a few miles west of what became the White Clay Creek Preserve, a separate parcel of more than 6,000 acres came up for sale. This acreage was assembled by a family of fox-hunters, a sport which has a long heritage in the area. When the family patriarch passed away, the property in Pennsylvania was acquired by George Strawbridge. The property south of the Mason-Dixon line was acquired by the state of Maryland. Realizing the unique quality and history of the property, Maryland avoided "park" status for the property, instead preserving it and designated it as the Fair Hill Natural Resources Area.

Over the years, many began to dream about the possibility of connecting the White Clay Preserve in Delaware/Pennsylvania with Fair Hill in Maryland. An interconnected, tri-state preserve with 10,000 contiguous acres – unique in the Northeast corridor. This treasure, just a 20 minute drive from Wilmington, and less than 45 minutes from Philadelphia and Baltimore, would build on the legacy left by our forebearers and provide future generations a respite from the hustle and bustle of modern life. Acquiring the Strawbridge properties was the lynchpin in this effort – and for the past 15 years, the state of Pennsylvania, Chester County, and private foundations in Pennsylvania and Delaware came together to raise more than \$30 million to acquire the Strawbridge parcels as part of the White Clay Creek Preserve.

The final Strawbridge parcel became part of the White Clay Creek Preserve in 2019. At the time, DCNR celebrated this milestone, noting that the property *“will always remain a place for low-impact recreation...a non-developed park for those wishing to explore nature without the development typically associated with a day-use or overnight park.”* Everyone involved at every step of the acquisition process (including DCNR) understood the property would be managed as part of the Preserve – a semi-wilderness area with limited, low-impact use.

In late 2022, Governor Wolf announced the creation of a new state park – Big Elk Creek State Park. This newly designated park was created out of thin air from the western part of the White Clay Creek Preserve – the same parcels acquired from George Strawbridge. In November 2023, DCNR held a meeting at Lincoln University to unveil a plan to develop Big Elk Creek State Park into a major tourist attraction that was completely out of step with the desires of the community – and the clear intent of many who fought to preserve the property. I attended this meeting along with over 400 other concerned citizens, many incredulous at what they heard.

Overnight, local citizens organized [SaveBigElkCreek.org](http://SaveBigElkCreek.org) to coordinate efforts. Everyday citizens joined with experienced activists and elected officials to marshal resources. Folks from across the political spectrum – republican, democrat, independent, united together in one voice: DCNR must abandon their plans to develop Big Elk Creek. It is a Preserve, not a Park.

The backlash was so immediate and so severe that local townships organized a Town Hall meeting on January 10, 2024 to get some answers from elected officials. Secretary Dunn, Director Hallas, Senators Comitta and Kane, me, all three Chester County Commissioners, and supervisors from Franklin and Elk townships were present. Over 500 people jammed into the local elementary school cafeteria for over three hours to

express their outrage over DCNR's proposal for Big Elk Creek. A petition with thousands of signatures was presented to Secretary Dunn asking DCNR to honor its commitment: manage Big Elk Creek as part of the White Clay Creek Preserve.

As a lifelong resident of Southern Chester County, I can tell you that I have never seen an issue galvanize the area like this. Honestly, it is very similar to what the history books have to say about the original effort to halt DuPont's plans to flood the White Clay Creek valley sixty years ago. People are passionate and engaged, and want the state to live up to its commitment to preserve this unique resource.

I have introduced legislation in the state House, HB1813, which would ensure Big Elk Creek State Park is managed as a preserve. But the truth is, legislation is not required to accomplish this goal. As Governor, you could make this designation with the stroke of a pen.

On behalf of past, present, and future residents of Chester County – along with thousands from surrounding areas who visit the Preserve to escape from modern life and enjoy time in the great outdoors – I ask you to issue an executive order to return Big Elk Creek State Park to its rightful place as part of the White Clay Creek Preserve.

I appreciate your consideration, and I am available at any time to discuss this issue in greater detail. Thank you for your continued service to the people of Pennsylvania.

Kind Regards –



John Lawrence  
State Representative  
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

