

Spring UPDATE 2024

State Representative

**JOHN LAWRENCE**

Serving Chester County

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## BIG ELK CREEK STATE PARK UPDATE



**Over 500 people crowded into the gymnasium at Avon Grove Charter School in Kemblesville during the January Town Hall hosted by Franklin and Elk townships.**

My office has been inundated with calls and emails regarding plans announced last November by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) to develop the Big Elk Creek State Park. A great deal has happened in the past few weeks on this issue, and I want to provide an update on the latest regarding the situation.

Many in our area are familiar with the White Clay Creek Preserve, which was created in 1984 after DuPont Corporation donated several thousand acres to the states of Delaware and Pennsylvania. The preserve has been managed as a publicly accessible wilderness area since 1984 with significant local stakeholder input. Since that time, the preserve has become a real cornerstone of our community, and a resource for folks far and wide who are looking to enjoy a few moments of solitude in nature.

Over the past 15 years, DCNR acquired several additional parcels of land in Franklin and Elk townships as additions to the White Clay Creek Preserve, with a goal of linking the preserve with Fair Hill Natural Resources Area in Maryland. Together, the tri-state preserve totals over 10,000 acres of open land available to the public – forests, fields, wilderness areas – one of the largest such areas in the Northeast Corridor.

Gov. Tom Wolf unilaterally redesignated part of the White Clay Creek Preserve in late 2002, creating the Big Elk Creek State Park. In November of 2023, DCNR held a public meeting at Lincoln University unveiling development plans to convert Big Elk Creek into an overnight destination with hundreds of campsites, RV-hookups and cabins. The presentation noted “final plan development” would be complete in a matter of weeks by

February 2024. DCNR did not take questions from the audience, leaving many of the over 400 attendees frustrated and angry.

After DCNR’s November meeting, Franklin and Elk townships organized a town hall meeting on Jan. 10, 2024, at the Avon Grove Charter School in Kemblesville, to give the community an opportunity to voice their concerns. Some will remember this building as the old Kemblesville Elementary School. Over 500 people crammed into the school gymnasium for over three hours, with dozens speaking in opposition to DCNR’s proposal.

It was incredible to see such a strong turnout. A number of elected officials were present, including the Chester County Commissioners, two state senators, township supervisors from Franklin and Elk townships, and top officials from DCNR, including Secretary Cindy Dunn.

Each elected official spoke at the beginning of the town hall. I spoke about the history of the White Clay Creek Preserve, the importance of the preserve to the community, my opposition to redesignating part of the preserve into a park, and my opposition to DCNR’s proposals to develop Big Elk Creek. Many of the other elected officials present shared similar concerns.

Two petitions with thousands of signatures were presented to Secretary Dunn, asking her to honor DCNR’s original commitment to manage the Big Elk parcels as part of the preserve. Many local residents joined environmental engineers, nature lovers, and even folks from Maryland and Delaware, all asking DCNR to reconsider its plans.

DCNR officials told the assembled crowd the campground proposal was “on hold for

*(Continued on next page)*

### Dear Neighbor,

It is an honor and very humbling to serve as your state representative in Harrisburg. I hope you find this newsletter informative about some of the important issues facing our area. I have included updates on Big Elk Creek State Park and Chester Water Authority, along with information on some upcoming projects in our area.

Your thoughts and opinions on state government are very important to me. If you would like to discuss state-related issues in greater detail, please do not hesitate to give me a call. You can reach me at the Jennersville office by dialing 610-869-1602.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve you in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives.

Respectfully Yours,



**In the governor’s office in Harrisburg, Rep. Lawrence presents a letter and a petition signed by hundreds of Chester County residents, asking Gov. Shapiro to uphold preserve status for Big Elk Creek State Park.**

## BIG ELK CREEK STATE PARK UPDATE *(Continued)*

now.” Several from the audience spoke on the need for an advisory group for Big Elk Creek, much like the group assembled in 1984 for the White Clay Creek Preserve. By the end of the evening, DCNR committed to the advisory group idea.

After the town hall meeting, I obtained documents showing DCNR developed detailed plans for a proposed \$14 million campground as far back as May 2022, five months before the creation of Big Elk Creek State Park was announced to the public. DCNR then hired a private consultant at significant expense to develop a fancy presentation with slick graphics to sell its proposal. This presentation, unveiled to the public during DCNR’s November 2023 meeting at Lincoln University, glossed over less appealing aspects of the plan, including millions of dollars set aside for on-site wastewater treatment and pit latrines.

In another deeply troubling move, DCNR repeatedly misled the public, stating that a public survey indicated a groundswell of support for its plans for Big Elk Creek. After much effort, I obtained original copies of the survey results, including freeform comments, which indicated the opposite was true. You can review these documents for yourself at [RepLawrence.com](http://RepLawrence.com).

DCNR’s attempt to fast-track the proposed development, its poor communication and lack of transparency are all unacceptable. I have

met directly with senior DCNR officials and expressed this to them in person, and I have raised these concerns with the governor’s office. In addition, I filed several Right-to-Know requests to obtain additional information, met with a number of local residents and township officials, and introduced **House Bill 1813** to prevent a state preserve from being converted into a park without legislative approval. But this is really just the beginning of what will be a years-long process to keep the pressure on DCNR to uphold its commitments to the community.

The strong community pushback on display at the January town hall meeting in Kemblesville made an important difference. To those who made time to be there, thank you for your attendance. Looking ahead, next steps will include monitoring the development of the proposed advisory group, holding DCNR accountable to the recommendations of the advisory group and vigilance on new proposals coming out of DCNR headquarters in Harrisburg.

For more information on this issue, please feel free to call me at the Jennersville office. I also encourage you to take a moment to review my website [RepLawrence.com/WCCPBCEP](http://RepLawrence.com/WCCPBCEP), which has dozens of documents, reports, surveys and graphics I obtained from various sources in recent weeks.

## STATE BUDGET UPDATE

One of the most important topics addressed by the Legislature each year is the state budget. Last year’s budget negotiations were unlike any in recent memory, with disputes between the Republican-controlled Senate and the Democrat-controlled House dragging on for months after the June 30 budget deadline. The final proposal, which included a billion dollars more in spending than anticipated revenue, passed on a near party-line vote. I was a “no” vote on last year’s unbalanced budget, and I have serious concerns about the fiscal sustainability of state government spending in the years ahead.

This year’s budget cycle began on Feb. 6, when Gov. Josh Shapiro outlined his proposed \$48.3 billion budget to a joint session of the General Assembly in the Capitol rotunda. An 8.4% increase over last year’s budget, the governor’s proposal spends **\$3 billion more than anticipated revenues**. I have significant concerns with this unbalanced and unsustainable level of spending.

The governor highlighted several new proposals in his address, including diverting \$282 million in sales tax revenue to a special fund for mass transit, borrowing \$500 million to hand out to businesses constructing facilities in Pennsylvania, a significant expansion of gambling and legalizing the sale of recreational marijuana. He also proposed combining the State System of Higher Education, which includes West Chester University, and the state’s 15 commu-

nity colleges into one state-operated entity.

As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I will participate in dozens of hearings over the coming weeks to scrutinize the governor’s proposals, questioning members of the governor’s cabinet and the heads of various state agencies on both their budget and their agency’s performance. These budget hearings are one of the few times these officials take questions from legislators in a public forum. Over the years, I have forced many officials – both Republican and Democrat – to answer questions on fiscal issues they might rather avoid talking about, including the infamous Farm Show Complex lease, the shady Lyme Timber deal, Chester Water Authority, issues at the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging and Penn State’s construction of an \$80 million art museum.

As I see it, elected officials must be responsible stewards of the hard-earned tax dollars sent to Harrisburg. I cannot support unbalanced budgets, spending billions more than revenues, and leaving the next generation an ever-increasing debt burden. These are things we see happening in Washington, and we should not emulate such fiscal irresponsibility on the state level.

I greatly value your opinions and feedback on the governor’s budget proposal, and state spending in general. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at the Jennersville office to offer your thoughts on these issues.

## CHESTER WATER AUTHORITY UPDATE

For the past four years, I have been leading efforts in the state House regarding Chester Water Authority (CWA). There have been two recent developments that merit attention. First, for the past 10 months, I have been fighting to obtain plans advanced by former Chester Mayor Thaddeus Kirkland to bail out the bankrupt city of Chester. The mayor publicly stated he had presented plans to the state, but refused to talk about what was contained in those plans. Many suspected the mayor was pushing a sale of CWA. After being stonewalled by the city, I filed an appeal to the Pennsylvania Office of Open Records (OOR) seeking these documents. Late last year, the OOR ruled in my favor, ordering the city to hand over the documents. The records show that Kirkland was in fact directly advocating for the sale of CWA, an asset the city does not control, with proceeds going to the city.

Second, on Jan. 29, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court issued a final opinion in the case *Pennsylvania Department of Community & Eco-*

*nomic Development vs City of Chester*. The case centered around disagreements between Chester’s city council, former mayor Kirkland, and the state-appointed receiver for the city of Chester, Michael Doweary, specifically about who could make certain decisions regarding the city’s finances. The court ruled in favor of the receiver, finding that state law gives the receiver broad authority over the city’s beleaguered finances. This decision makes clear it is the receiver, not the city, in the driver’s seat going forward to chart a path for the bankrupt city’s finances.

Both developments add to the complex web that has developed around this issue over the past few years. I strongly encourage you to check out both the mayor’s plans, as well as the Supreme Court decision. Both are available on my website, [RepLawrence.com/CWA](http://RepLawrence.com/CWA), and both are well worth reading.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at the Jennersville office if you have questions or concerns about this issue.



# UPCOMING SOUTHERN CHESTER COUNTY CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Many roads and bridges in our area need significant repair and reconstruction. I met with state engineers a few weeks ago at PennDOT's regional headquarters in King of Prussia to discuss projects on the horizon for southern Chester County. Many of these projects are in the design phase, which means you have the opportunity to speak into these projects with ideas and suggestions as they are being designed. While not a comprehensive list, I wanted to provide an update on several projects that have generated several calls to my office.

## Route 1 Bypass

The Kennett-Oxford Route 1 bypass was initially constructed in the mid-1960s. Sixty years later, the road is showing its age. PennDOT has plans to undertake a complete reconstruction of the bypass in the next decade. Plans include rebuilding the roadway down to the dirt, redesigning several of the overpasses, and adjusting entry and exit ramps to meet today's needs. Since the bypass is over 22 miles long, the reconstruction will be broken into four separate sections, each addressed in succession. Design work is ongoing, but parts of the project are coming into focus. To mention a few highlights, the Route 10 interchange in Oxford will see the addition of traffic lights at both entry points, and the overpass will be expanded to three lanes to add a left turn lane for traffic entering Route 1 in either direction. Similarly, the Route 796 interchange in Jennersville will also see additional traffic controls, along with a redesigned overpass to add a sidewalk and left turn lanes in both directions. The 841 interchange in West Grove, which currently features inadequate "merge-or-die" entry ramps, will be redesigned to include proper acceleration lanes for traffic merging onto Route 1. At my request, PennDOT will also address the intersection of Evergreen Street and Chatham Road as part of the project. While construction is still a few years away, now is a great time to provide PennDOT with feedback or suggestions on the proposal. Additional details on how to reach the right contacts can be found on PennDOT's website at the end of this article.

## Route 1 Widening in Kennett, East Marlborough Townships

I have received many calls asking about delays and construction on Route 1 between the end of the bypass and Longwood Gardens. PennDOT recently started a long-planned project to expand this section of Route 1 from two to three lanes in each direction. The project presents some unique challenges, including moving several utility lines and a house near the Longwood Fire Company to make room for the widened road. Construction will begin in earnest this summer and continue until completion.

## Route 896 Corridor Improvements

Growing up in Kemblesville, Route 896 has been a part of my life for many years. Aside from the intersection reconstruction at Gypsy Hill Road in the early 1980s, most of Route 896 has not seen any real engineering or realignment since it was originally paved 100 years ago. Back in 2006, long before I was elected to office, I attended a meeting in Franklin Township at which local officials and PennDOT discussed the need for improvements to Route 896. Over time, this initiative grew into a corridor study, eventually looking at the road from the Maryland state line north to Cobblers Lane in New London Township. After years of design and review, PennDOT is close to final approval on a plan to address longstanding issues on this stretch of road. London Britain Township will see a new left-turn lane for southbound 896 traffic turning onto Chambers Rock Road. Reconstruction is planned to address issues where Good Hope Road and Appleton Road intersect with 896. To further enhance public safety, the roadway will be slightly widened at points, and several hills will be regraded to provide better line-of-sight for motorists. Several aspects of these projects are still in design, and further details can be found on the website at the end of this article.



## Camp Bonsul Road Covered Bridge

In the early morning hours of Sept. 2, 2021, the remnants of Hurricane Ida destroyed the Camp Bonsul covered bridge. Standing on the bridge abutment the next morning, I looked across to the other side of the creek and took in the surreal surroundings – the bridge had vanished, almost as if it had never been there.

The Camp Bonsul bridge is owned by Chester County, not PennDOT. Chester County maintains many of the covered bridges in our area and has gone to great lengths to restore and refurbish these bridges as part of the historic fabric of our community. After the bridge was destroyed, Chester County evaluated the situation and determined a new covered bridge would be constructed. The new covered bridge will look almost identical to the old one, but with an improved structure underneath to provide additional strength to better support vehicles traveling over the bridge. These improvements should also help the bridge to better handle future storms and flooding. Permitting and environmental approvals have been obtained. The project will go out to bid this spring, and a construction contract is likely to be awarded by late summer/early autumn.

## Route 41 Improvements

One of the busiest roads in southern Chester County, Route 41, has been a source of endless discussion for decades. There have been some improvements, including the reconstruction of the Route 41 / Old Baltimore Pike intersection several years ago, and work at the intersection of Routes 41 and 926 that will begin in the coming weeks. But many of the more challenging problems facing this busy road remain. Many proposals have come and gone over the years, with various officials at loggerheads on how to proceed. Recently, a group of local stakeholders indicated a willingness to revisit longstanding challenges with an eye toward finding solutions. Specifically, Londonderry, London Grove, New Garden and Kennett townships have commenced a joint corridor study along with Avondale Borough, to take a wholistic look at Route 41 from the Delaware line to just south of Cochranville. Bowman Consulting has been engaged to perform the study. A public meeting was held on Feb. 1, and future meetings will provide additional opportunities for feedback. If you have input or suggestions regarding this stretch of Route 41, this is an ideal time to make your voice heard. Comments can be emailed to John Yurick at Bowman Consulting at [JYurick@Bowman.com](mailto:JYurick@Bowman.com). You can also reach out to Ken Battin at London Grove Township at [KBattin@LondonGrove.org](mailto:KBattin@LondonGrove.org).

This is far from a comprehensive list of projects in our area. If you have questions or concerns about other roads or bridges in our area, please call me at the Jennersville office. For more details on PennDOT projects in Chester County, including information on how you can provide input and feedback to the engineers and designers leading each project, please visit: <https://www.penndot.pa.gov/RegionalOffices/district-6/ConstructionsProjectsAndRoadwork/ChesterCounty/Pages/default.aspx>.

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**Avon Grove Charter School Students Visit Capitol**



I recently hosted the junior and senior high school student councils from Avon Grove Charter School for a day at the Capitol in Harrisburg. After touring the House and the Senate, I spoke with the students on current issues facing state government, and the importance of service.

**Tax Forms  
Now Available**

E-filing taxes continues to grow in popularity, but many still prefer to file their taxes the old-fashioned way through the U.S. mail. For many years, the U.S. Postal Service made paper tax forms available at local post offices but discontinued this practice several years ago. If you need paper tax forms, please stop by my office in Jannersville at 1 Commerce Blvd, West Grove. We have a full range of common tax forms available, and we can print additional forms if necessary. Please feel free to call our office at **610-869-1602** if you have specific questions regarding tax forms.

**Breaking Ground on New Home for Medic-94, AGREM**



For many years, Medic-94 and AGREM have been faithfully serving the community in times of need. Medic-94 provides emergency paramedic services for most of southern Chester County, while AGREM is a multi-municipal emergency management organization. Together, these non-profits dedicate thousands of hours to the betterment of our community. To meet future needs and ensure these

organizations have a permanent home, Penn Township, Chester County and the state have partnered to help build a new facility off Old Baltimore Pike in the heart of Jannersville. Final construction approvals have been obtained and, absent unexpected delays, the building should be finished and open to the community later this year.