

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

People and Wildlife Living in Harmony

Floodplains Better Left Natural

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By Cliff Fairweather

Floodplain protection is a critical element of any comprehensive effort to protect the health of Loudoun County streams. Protection for floodplains has recently been strengthened under the county's new zoning ordinance.



Unfortunately, proposals now being floated would remove this well-crafted and carefully negotiated countywide protection in order to address a problem affecting some schools. These proposals are of great concern to the Audubon Naturalist Society and others working to protect the health of our streams.

Prior to the new ordinance, land was designated for ball fields in floodplains adjacent to some county schools. Under the new rules this land can no longer be used for that purpose.

We believe that there are ways to resolve this problem without eliminating the protection afforded streams under the new ordinance.

Part of the solution should include moving forward with community sketch plans to identify locations for future ball fields that do not intrude into floodplains. As for ball fields planned for floodplains prior to the new zoning ordinance, solutions need to be found on a case by case basis rather than overturning the ordinance.

Moreover schools and other institutions need to stop viewing floodplains as land available for ball fields. Recent research has shown that compacted soils in floodplains, such as occurs under ball fields, are not nearly as effective in absorbing rainfall as undisturbed land. Ball fields also reduce critical vegetative buffers from along streams.

We can learn lessons from neighboring Fairfax and even eastern Loudoun. The most obvious of these is that streams without floodplain protection and vegetative buffers are in much worse shape than those with a protected floodplain.

Where floodplain protection is absent, more storm water runs off the land and into streams. This increased runoff causes stream bank erosion, greater downstream flooding, damage to roads, bridges, and private property, and degrades stream ecosystems. Our past failure to protect streams has created a costly legacy of restoration for which we now must pay.

The good news is that much of Loudoun still has healthy streams that can be protected. Protecting healthy streams is always less expensive and more effective than efforts to restore degraded ones. Local stream protection also helps safeguard water quality in the Potomac and the Chesapeake. Children need both ball fields and healthy streams. The ball field issue provides an important opportunity for adults to teach by example, showing young people how environmental protection can be balanced with the needs of sports.

If you are concerned about the proposed revisions to existing floodplain protection, please take a moment to write to the Board of Supervisors at loudounbos@aol.com and let them know your thoughts. To be even more effective, watch for the public hearing notice so that you can attend and speak in favor of the existing regulations. Contact Gem Bingol, LWC Stream Team Chair for more information at gem.bingol@verizon.net.