

Our Forum

Keep park uncluttered

When Joseph W. Luter III envisioned Windsor Castle Park, his plan was for it to remain as natural as possible.

The former Smithfield Foods President and CEO poured \$7 million into turning the farm and surrounding forests into a park that would, in his words, continue as “natural – passive – untouched when possible. These should be our guide as future plans for Windsor Castle Park are considered.”

When the park opened in 2010, it had walking paths, a fishing pier, a dog park and a kayak/canoe launch. That’s it. The manor house was uninhabited and in need of repair, and the grounds immediately surrounding it were, and continue to be, protected by a historic easement from the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

A local farmer continued planting and harvesting cotton, soybeans and corn.

In 2014, Luter wrote a letter to the town because residents were fast and furiously coming up with all sorts of ideas for the park, with one being particularly controversial — a disc golf course.

The disc golf course didn’t happen, nor did the proposed fitness stations or amphitheater. What were added were the natural playground, which encourages families to visit, a picnic area and some portable toilets.

In the years that have followed, the park has increasingly become a blank canvas for individuals and groups to make their mark.

In July, a town report listed 16 projects that have been built, installed or conducted at the park by local groups and individuals.

Some are innocuous, like benches at the playground, while others are quite visible and too often built and then neglected, such as the monarch butterfly habitat.

Last summer, a herd of odoriferous goats were brought in to eat poison ivy and were caged in an electric fence surrounded by bright orange plastic web fencing. Not exactly in keeping with an 18th century look.

By the end of the summer, the goats were hustled out because something about their penned area had attracted bears. The two bears became a zoo-like attraction and the park got lots of foot and vehicle traffic during that time. The ugly electric fence still stands, and it’s unclear what is going to be done with that, or if the goats will return to continue eating weeds that will again grow back.

In time, the farmer quit growing commercial row crops due to concerns about using pesticides and fertilizers in the park. He voluntarily planted sunflowers instead. It was a quirky idea that brought thousands of people to town, but it would be a stretch to call it a tranquil activity. This year the deer ate the sunflowers, so that idea was a bust. Now a better idea has emerged. A group is planting lingleaf pine, which shouldn’t produce traffic jams.

One can’t discuss activities at the park without mentioning Smithfield VA Events, which puts on three festivals there a year. What the group does is commendable, as it raises thousands of dollars each year for Isle of Wight’s civic and nonprofit groups.

At the same time, it has fueled the construction of additional buildings near the manor house. The idea is that they replicate barns that were there at some time in the past. The nonprofit has also benefited from brush clearing near those barns, which has created a lovely, but hardly natural, wooded area that has discouraged most critters from living in that thicket.

The town, meanwhile, has turned the manor house into an event venue, put a fence around it and cut down maturing oak trees for a better — in the town’s opinion — view of the marsh and Smithfield Station.

Now some town officials want to dig up a grave and see if the person inside was the town founder. Mayor Carter Williams says the town must know who’s in the ground there. We’re not sure why.

The fear is, with the onslaught of well-intentioned projects, the park will get gunked up — that is, become so littered with signs, objects, fenced areas and more, that it will lose the peaceful, unspoiled character that was Luter’s vision in the first place.

He wrote: “The natural, passive character of the park must be preserved. No changes should be made that might threaten the tranquility of this extraordinary place.”

Our Forum

Dumping carcasses can be a crime

Pickup trucks, some outfitted with dog cages and parked along back roads, are as traditional as turkey and sweet potatoes here in the fall.

From now until the beginning of January, it's deer hunting season in Virginia.

Hunting is not only a sport; it's a calculated effort to control the deer population. With the demise of most natural predators, we are it.

While some don't agree with that strategy, most people would concede that deer have become nearly as ubiquitous as squirrels – except many times larger with an appetite for azaleas and tomatoes to match. They are a menace to commercial crops, and for that reason, the state allows farmers to take deer out of season with a permit. Deer are also the cause of untold vehicle collisions each year, especially when bucks are on the hunt for a mate.

And then there are the ticks. Deer are host to several species of ticks that can transmit deadly or debilitating diseases to humans if not caught in time.

Like it or not, deer hunting season is the best solution we have right now to control the population, plus the purchases of licenses help fund conservation efforts in the state.

This makes all the shooting and making of venison burgers a good thing, but there remains one uncomfortable problem – what to do with the unused carcass.

A male white-tailed deer can weigh up to 300 pounds. After all the desirable meat is removed, that still leaves a large amount of bones, fur and entrails to deal with.

There is a hunter, or hunters, who have decided that dumping their unused deer remains below the Cypress Creek Bridge in downtown Smithfield is acceptable. It's fast, easy and likely on the way home.

Other bridges around Isle of Wight County are also favorite dumping spots.

Dumping deer carcasses can be a crime. It falls under littering and can result in jail time if a judge is so inclined.

The threat of incarceration apparently isn't strong enough, as dumping carcasses off bridges is not confined to downtown Smithfield, Woodland Drive or Quaker Road in Isle of Wight County. It's a statewide problem.

Responsible hunters condemn the practice, not only for its unsightliness, the threat of water contamination and disrespect for the animal, but also because it provides fuel for what they call the “anti's” — those who oppose hunting of any kind.

Conservation police also suspect the dumpers are not hunting legally, or are not tagging their kills properly, and that is why they covertly dump the carcasses.

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries also warns of the spread of chronic wasting disease from the irresponsible disposal of deer carcasses. Chronic wasting disease is a contagious neurological illness that ultimately ends in death for the affected deer. It does not appear to affect humans. So far, CWD has been found in Culpeper, Frederick and Shenandoah counties in Virginia and game officials warn that infected carcasses can contaminate an area for years. If it takes hold, it could negatively impact the deer population.

Fewer deer might give dumpers pause.

Most hunt clubs have a process for disposing of carcasses, and some landowners allow carcasses to be buried or left on the property where they are harvested.

That allows scavenger animals, such as buzzards, fox and coyotes, to feast without having to resort to your dog or cat — in the case of coyotes, that is.

Other hunters take their kill to a processor, who handles the unused portions.

DGIF recommends double-bagging the remains and putting them in the trash.

Some hunters see no difference between tossing their deer remains in the trash, as they would a turkey or chicken carcass or beef bones.

The SPSA landfill in Suffolk said that if necessary, hunters can cut up a carcass, double-bag it and put it in their personal trash.

Certainly that option is better than leaving it on the side of the road.

Our Forum

Plan for traffic future

Isle of Wight County and the Town of Smithfield should consider holding a joint summit on how the two localities plan to deal with transportation in the coming years.

That is, what road projects need to be placed on the application schedule and when.

In addition to the more than 3,500 housing units either entering the process or approved years ago, there are more sleeper projects that appear to be waking up.

The Town of Smithfield has recently met with engineers with Napolitano Homes, which owns what was rezoned as Mallory Pointe in 2005, as well as the 184-acre Scott Farm. The developer is looking to build 1,100 housing units on those two properties, according to town officials. Both tracts are located near the intersection of Battery Park and Nike Park roads — narrow two-lane roads that serve as feeders for Route 17 on the way to the James River Bridge.

The Nike Park-Battery Park intersection was rated “F” for afternoon peak traffic as far back as 2012. The current solution is to put a traffic circle there, as well as widen Nike Park Road to four lanes — a project that is right now pegged for 2034, 15 years down the road.

It’s not a stretch to realize that Isle of Wight is attractive to developers right now because it has available land close to the major metropolitan localities where the jobs are. One can’t fault them seeing Isle of Wight as a cash cow, and you can’t fault current residents for being dismayed at the thought of more houses, more people and more cars.

While it’s true, as one supervisor pointed out, that these developments do not spring up in “one week,” the slow and steady drip of more houses and more people is going to continue to strain what is already an increasingly congested northern Isle of Wight County.

Unfortunately, road improvements don’t happen in one week, either.

County officials have devised plans over the years for various projects to address a growing population, but that all hinges on getting the money to do it.

Isle of Wight is part of the Hampton Roads region, and road projects here are scored competitively based on congestion. One transportation official said that no matter how congested Isle of Wight may seem, it doesn’t hold a candle to areas such as Virginia Beach and Norfolk.

Roads projects scored under Smart Scale also need to show a regional impact.

Isle of Wight was fortunate to receive funding for two large intersection projects along Route 17 at Brewer’s Neck Boulevard and the Nike Park extension.

The Nike Park extension will connect Route 17 with Reynolds Drive, allowing another way to get from the James River Bridge to Smithfield. It will also add another stoplight along Route 17.

One highly congested area in state hands is the James River Bridge. That too becomes congested in the morning and evening rush hours, not to mention when there is a bridge lift or accident. VDOT has indicated that there are no plans to widen the bridge. Instead, officials are looking for bridge congestion to decrease once the Hampton Roads Bridge tunnel expansion is complete.

Let’s hope that prediction comes true.

The Green Team

Congratulations to the newly formed Green Team — a group of individuals from numerous civic groups, schools and government agencies who have come together to begin tackling environmental issues in the Town of Smithfield and beyond.

One of their first projects is to organize a community-wide cleanup day in March where volunteers can sign up to pick up litter and trash along the road.

Taking time to pick up behind other people’s sloppy habits is admirable, and those who are spearheading this effort should be commended.