

Kayaker uncovers landfill remnants in Colonial Beach

CATHY DYSON

The Free Lance-Star


James Hall retired earlier this year and bought a waterfront mobile home in Colonial Beach where he savors life on Monroe Creek.

“I am surrounded by gorgeous views,” he said, looking out from the sliding glass doors in his bedroom.

From his vantage point, he sees bald eagles fly over regularly. In fact, one took to the air as soon as a Free Lance-Star reporter and photographer arrived at his Westmoreland and County home.

A clutch of swans hatched from a nearby nest this spring and Hall jokes

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 **WATCH:** James Hall describes his reaction to finding about a mile of shoreline cluttered with trash during an outing on Monroe Creek. Point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**



Glass bottles are stuck in different layers of the bank of Monroe Creek. Farther downstream are heaps of rusting metal and other larger pieces of trash.

Creek

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they “need a runway like a 747” to take off. He marvels at the sound their wing tips make as they thump against the water, working up momentum to lift their 20- or 30-pound bodies in the air.

But as Hall, 69, has followed the winding curves of Monroe Creek—which feeds into the bigger Monroe Bay and eventually the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay—he’s come across an eyesore and potential health hazard.

In the more shallow parts of the creek, banks are embedded with glass bottles of various shapes and sizes. Some once held soda, pickles or liquid cleaners; they’re brown, blue and white with wide mouths, jug handles or jagged edges.

Farther downstream are heaps of rusting metal, carcasses of old appliances, cylinders that probably contained propane as well as paint cans tossed to the ground. There’s even a couple decrepit vehicles on the taller banks, their grills and frames poking through the underbrush.

From a kayak in the creek, it’s hard to see everything that lurks along the banks.

“It makes me sick to look at it,” Hall said as he pointed out the piles. “I couldn’t in good faith ignore it because I got kids, grandkids, neighbors, everybody comes out here.”

Hall hasn’t kept quiet about his discovery. He’s asked questions of longtime residents, filed a formal complaint with Westmoreland County and talked with Robin Schick, mayor of Colonial Beach.

Here’s the situation: Back in the day, the town operated a landfill, not far from the creek and the site of James Monroe’s birthplace, said Norm Risavi, who’s been Westmoreland’s county administrator for 30 years.

The makeshift dump hasn’t been used in his time, but before the days of strict environmental regulations and lined landfills, people drove out to a remote location and threw out their trash. Hall believes they probably started at the edge of Monroe Creek and worked their way back. Old-timers have told him they remember



TRISTAN LOREI PHOTOS, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

James Hall uses his paddle to jab at discarded trash and appliances on the banks of Monroe Creek in Colonial Beach last week. ‘It makes me sick to look at it,’ Hall said as he pointed out the piles.

visiting the landfill up to 70 years ago.

Over time, some of the waste settled into the ground. As the creekbanks eroded, the embedded bottles surfaced.

In mid-October, Hall shared his concerns about the trash and possible water contamination with Westmoreland’s land-use office. He spoke with three people in the next two weeks, then contacted the newspaper when he didn’t get a follow-up call.

Risavi checked with his staff after the newspaper reached out to him, and he contacted Hall. Hall invited him to take a ride in a kayak and see for himself—just as he showed newspaper staff—but Risavi is recovering from a knee injury and couldn’t risk a boat ride.

The two determined that the trash Hall has seen was part of the landfill and is on 27 acres owned by the Town of Colonial Beach.

A Westmoreland ordinance allows it to notify landowners who have piles of trash on their property. If they don’t comply and clean up the mess, the county will do so and add the cost to the person’s tax bill, Risavi said. But because the town is exempt from taxes, as are all local governments, the ordinance doesn’t apply in this case, he added.

The same day he met with Hall,

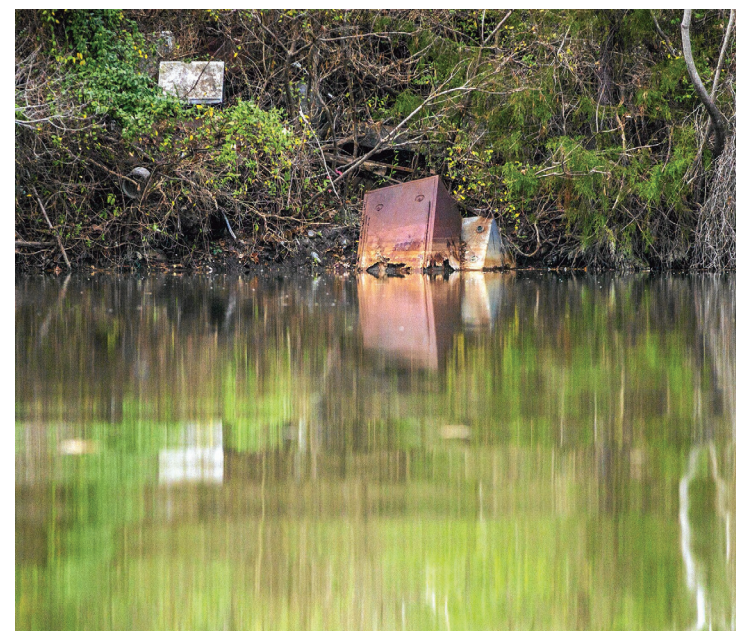
Risavi reached out to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to see if there are grants that might help the town with the cleanup. A DEQ official is making arrangements to tour the property, Risavi said on Wednesday.

“This is not something a few thousand dollars is gonna fix,” he said.

He also contacted an engineering firm to take water samples of the area. Like Hall, he’s concerned about what could be there. Past samples in Monroe Bay showed polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, Risavi said. They are highly carcinogenic chemical compounds, formerly used in industrial and consumer products. Their production was banned in 1979 by the Environmental Protection Agency.

“I think the important thing is to do some sampling and get a clear picture of what if any contaminants are there,” Risavi said. “I know in the past, we questioned whether or not some of that could be leaching from that old landfill. It’s hard to tell what was thrown in there.”

Schick, Colonial Beach’s mayor, said she’s familiar with some of the trash Hall has discovered but hasn’t been farther back into Monroe Creek where the bigger piles are. About a decade ago, she



Old appliances are among the debris on the banks of Monroe Creek. The trash is likely part of an old landfill and is on 27 acres owned by the Town of Colonial Beach.

and Mitzi Saffos, owner of Colonial Beach Brewing, started a local Save the Bay campaign in Colonial Beach because of their mutual concern about water quality.

The two arranged for Marine groups to come and attack some of the mess in Monroe Creek. They focused on the area across from the Monroe Bay Mobile Home Park where Hall lives. The Marines worked from their kayaks and tossed bottles and other trash they dislodged into a pontoon boat.

The day-long effort yielded a lot of junk and workers got muddy hands and boots, but barely made a dent.

“We felt a little bit defeated because there was still so much more to do,” Schick said.

In subsequent years, she said the Save the Bay campaign has focused on more accessible areas.

Schick mentioned that there’s some question about property lines, old records and who owns what, but that it’s pointless to quibble about those details.

“We need to be doing everything we can do to protect our ecosystem here because we are vitally dependent on it, our economy is dependent on it, our food is dependent on it,” she said. “We want to have clean waterways and healthy fisheries.”

Westmoreland officials also

contacted Schick after Hall and Risavi met. There’s talk of collaborating on another living shoreline project similar to what the county and town did on Robin Grove Lane, “another place that had dumping issues a long time ago,” Schick said.

The project included DEQ grants and engineering help from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

While it’s not clear if a similar cleanup and oyster restoration project would work at Monroe Creek, one thing is obvious: Hall won’t let the piles of trash ruin the retirement home he’s come to love.

Like some of the bottles he’s discovered, Hall was broken when he moved to the water after divorce left him estranged from three of his seven children. As he got to know his older neighbors, he started “driving Miss Daisy,” taking four women and two men to medical appointments or grocery shopping.

He thought that was God’s purpose in moving him to Monroe Creek, but when he saw the piles of trash along the water, he picked up a secondary cause.

“This here is a like a mission now,” Hall said. “I can’t let this go until it’s cleaned up.”

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Super Bowl champ will help tackle restoration

BY CATHY DYSON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The air in the government boardroom was charged with hope, excitement and celebrity buzz Tuesday night as King George County native Jermon Bushrod, part of the New Orleans Saints' Super Bowl championship team, returned to his hometown to tackle an issue that's loomed for decades.

He wants to offer the support of his foundation, Visualize & Rize, as well as personal donations and whatever capital he can muster from his



Bushrod (center) jokes with Otis C. Penn after signing an autograph for Penn during a break at the county meeting.

network of connections, to help restore the aging Ralph Bunche High School. It was built in 1949 to house the county's Black students after King George parents sued for an equal facility for their children, but has been closed for decades and has started to deteriorate. There have been several attempts over the years to renovate the building but none have gotten off the ground.

Bushrod, whose father, Jerry, attended the school for a year, believes the mission

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to bring the facility back to its former glory, and to provide educational and athletic opportunities for young and old in King George and surrounding localities, meshes perfectly with his foundation.

“I enjoyed my NFL career,” he said after presenting a slide show to the Board of Supervisors. “I had highs, I had lows, a Super Bowl win, accolades and other awards. To be part of a journey of this magnitude with a team of motivated individuals, upon competition, would be the most impact and meaningful of my life.”

Supervisors voted unanimously to approve partnerships and to draw up the legal memorandums between Bushrod’s foundation and the county, which owns the building, and the Ralph Bunche Alumni Association. Supervisor Annie Cupka was championing at the bit to make the motion after Bushrod’s presentation, and fellow board members Cathy Binder and Richard Granger immediately seconded it.

Alumni members in the audience clapped after the motion was doubly seconded and again after the vote. Bushrod proceeded to pose for pictures, give out hugs and handshakes and sign autographs for anyone who wanted one, including Supervisor T.C. Collins, who noted the special appearance earlier in the meeting.

“It’s not very often we get the presence of a Super Bowl NFL champion right here in front of us, King George’s own son, Mr. Bushrod, to give a presentation and be a part of a forward-thinking organization,” Collins said. “You started out in King George playing football ... and you became famous, but you never left your home roots and you’ve always been humble and want to help the young people in your community.”

Bushrod, who turns 38 on Friday, didn’t announce the amount of his donation. He told The Free Lance-Star before Tuesday’s meeting that he wanted to secure the support from the Board of Supervisors first, then go from there. A newly appointed Ralph Bunche Advisory Committee, composed of people in the community who are interested in the renovation, was reinstated in June to come up with a plan and seek out funding sources.

Bushrod say announcements will be made in coming weeks about the financial aspects of the partnership. But one change he did announce is the name of the facility. “The Ralph Bunche Vi-



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Jermon Bushrod presents his vision for the former Ralph Bunche High School, which was built in 1948 to house Black students in King George County.

sualize and Rize Center really has a nice ring to it,” he said.

At Tuesday’s meeting, the former offensive lineman sat in the front row of the audience next to Claudette Jordon, president of the school’s alumni association. She introduced him “as the most important guy in the house tonight. We’re happy to have him.”

Bushrod raised the microphone as high as it would go, but still spent most of the presentation leaning his 6-foot 5-inch frame over the podium.

When Chairman Jeff Stonehill noted that he’d been sitting near a New York Giants fan—Sheriff Chris Giles—Bushrod joked that he and the sheriff would have to talk later.

The first slide in his presentation showed him in a New Orleans uniform, carrying the King George County flag around the stadium after the team’s Super Bowl win in 2010. He started his foundation that same year and since then has raised more than \$1.1 million. Student-athletes in 13 communities in four states—Virginia and the places he played professional football for 12 years—have received 300 scholarships. Two-thirds of the recipients were from King George and surrounding areas, Bushrod said Tuesday.

He said his foundation focuses on educational and athletic opportunities, to provide students the tools to reach their full potential. Bushrod also has supported athletic programs at King George High School, held annual football camps there, led toy drives and provided holiday meals.

He and his family also have raised money for the Liv4thecure Foundation, which researches chromosomal disorders. He and his wife, Jessica, lost their third child, Jordyn Lynn,

It will be a big mountain to climb, but I think together we can go farther.

—JERMON BUSHROD,
VISUALIZE & RIZE
FOUNDATION
PRESIDENT

to such a syndrome in October 2018. The couple has four living children, ages 10 months to 10 years, and Bushrod keeps busy at their Florida home with coaching their teams and doing a preseason announcer “gig” with the Saints on Fox Sports.

Bushrod told the newspaper he’ll continue with the scholarships and annual football camp and celebrity golf tournament, but that he sees the work on the Ralph Bunche school as one with a “long-lasting and tangible impact.” He’s wanted his foundation to have a space where students, as well as people of varying ages, could be involved with athletics or tutoring programs, take classes on nutrition or new technology or have a place to work out.

On his regular visits to King George, Bushrod said he often drove by the vacant Ralph Bunche building and wondered why “there’s never any action there.” When he heard about the new focus to restore the facility, he contacted Jordon, who gladly put him in touch with people who could show him around the school.

“As I’ve gotten the opportunity to learn more and more about the history from the Alumni Association, the history is so rich and the message is so rich and why it was put there as a whole, is monumental,” he said. “They were in a place to help a certain demographic that needed people and resources to help them.”

He believes the current mission is similar, but the “revamp” will be different. Instead of building a new school, the restoration will focus on providing places in the restored space where people can learn about the history through an interactive museum, as well as improve their own well-being.

He’s looking to set up a training center in the large auxiliary building, which he said already has the look of such a facility.

Bushrod also spoke at length, during the board meeting and with The Free Lance-Star, about “the power in collaboration” and said the more motivated minds that come together to help with the restoration, the better. At Tuesday’s meeting, people in the audience nodded in agreement as he spoke.

“It will be a big mountain to climb, but I think together we can go farther,” he said.

King George recently paid an architectural firm to update the cost of restoring the building, which has a leaky roof, asbestos and mold problems and isn’t compliant with the American Disabilities Act. The estimate is about \$7.5 million.

However, the school has “good bones, no arthritis at all,” Jordon said during a tour last month.

The county received a \$500,000 grant from the National Park Service to replace the roof and that work is expected to start next month. King George also applied for a second grant for the same amount from the NPS to deal with mold issues.

On Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors moved forward with applying for another grant, worth \$1 million, from the Industrial Revitalization Fund for other preservation efforts at the school.

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K.G. supervisor says he won't 'give up Jesus' for a meeting

BY CATHY DYSON

THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Elected officials often face difficult choices, but King George County Supervisor T.C. Collins presented a dilemma not usually heard in government discussions.

"I don't think it's fair to make me have to choose between Jesus



Collins

and this board," he said during Tuesday's board meeting.

A former State Police officer who joined the board in January, Collins has mentioned that he attends Bible study on Wednesday nights. He asked the board last month to avoid mid-week meetings because, earlier this year, he missed many Bible lessons because budget work sessions seemed to fall on every Wednesday.

When county officials this week discussed a time they might gather to go over possible changes to tax ordinances, the majority

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selected the best option as Wednesday, Oct. 4. Collins wouldn't accept that there weren't other days available and was told three times by Chairman Jeff Stonehill—who apologized for the scheduling conflict—that Oct. 4 was the date most people preferred.

Collins called it ironic, told fellow members “you're basically excluding me from this work session” and wondered why anyone would even consider holding a meet-

ing on a Wednesday when he's made it clear he's not available.

“Can you give me a reasonable explanation why you would have an event come up and schedule it for when someone has an engagement already?” Collins asked. “My event was scheduled before this event.”

Supervisor Cathy Binder tried to smooth things over.

“I understand, but we all make sacrifices,” she said. “My daughter played a basketball game tonight and I'm here at this board meeting.”

Stonehill told Collins that “we try to work around your Wednesdays,” but “those are just unfortunate circumstances that you have to give up things like the rest of us.”

“I'm not gonna give up Jesus,” Collins said.

All Stonehill could say at first was “OK,” then he added that the board would try to do better in the future.

“It's not like you're doing better in the future because it's already occurred over and over again. And I'm done,” Collins said, turning off his microphone.

But he wasn't. Moments

later, he asked for a full transcription of the meeting, not the usual minutes, although the minutes do provide a word-for-word breakdown of what's said. Also, the meetings are videotaped and streamed live over the county's YouTube channel, then available for viewing the following day.

Fellow members agreed to provide Collins a transcript but didn't go along with his demand to pass a motion that no votes would be taken at the work session.

County Attorney Kelly Lackey said work ses-

sions are primarily for fact-finding, but Collins wanted the extra assurance that nothing would be decided in his absence. No one seconded his motion and it died.

King George supervisors requested a work session with staff members from the county treasurer and commissioner of the revenue offices to talk about personal property taxes, particularly the fee for vehicles. Board members heard a lot of complaints from residents this year about skyrocketing bills and wanted to discuss an ordinance that allows

them to refund part of the vehicle tax, on a prorated basis, if there's a surplus after the fiscal-year audit.

Board members also plan to discuss how vehicles are valued in terms of county taxes. The state allows localities to tax vehicles based on a high or medium value. King George uses the high measurement and will discuss the impact of the medium assessment during the work session, planned at 6 p.m. Oct. 5 in the boardroom of the county administration building.

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