On October 28, 2020, at 7 p.m., a group of eight Marietta-area residents concerned about the proposed filling of Williamstown Wetlands met via Zoom with Brent Bailey, executive director of the WV Land Trust, and Ashton Berdine, lands program manager for the WV Land Trust. Both grew up in Parkersburg and are familiar with the wetlands.

Random notes from a meeting without an agenda.

Chris Bender, owner of DaVinci’s restaurant and the wetlands, adored Elsa and Bill Thompson, Jr. They would disapprove of her intention to fill the wetlands.

Ms. Bender doesn’t have to destroy the wetlands to open a casino. There are other vacant properties in Williamstown, some of which would be more desirable locations.

Ms. Bender can be defensive and adversarial. Be prepared for conflict. She owns the wetland.

A partnership of organizations invested in this wetlands six years ago, primarily the Women’s Club of Williamstown. An arrangement was made with the previous owner of DaVinci’s that the Women’s Club would lease the wetlands for $1 per year and maintain the boardwalk. Perpetuity may have been implied, not written. When Ms. Bender bought the restaurant and property several years ago, she broke the contract with the Women’s Club.

One of the Marietta residents was in touch with Rita Stephan, who is still active with the Williamstown Women’s Club, seeking a copy of the agreement, or any other written information about the wetlands.

The WV Land Trust is always interested in conservation strategies, new acquisitions. That organization doesn’t litigate. They try to do land deals, via donation or purchase. They’re good at getting grant money and other funding for land acquisition. They would like to approach Ms. Bender and ask if she’s willing to sell the wetlands. They will also seek regulatory roadblocks in filling the wetlands.

Maybe if the WVLT acquired the wetlands, it could be transferred to the Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge, or to the town of Williamstown, or to Wood County. The NWR is not permitted to get involved in such issues, but if the land trust acquired it, the refuge might be able to acquire it. The wetland is less than a mile from Buckley Island, which is in the refuge. The refuge is currently in the process of acquiring land near Wheeling and Gallipolis.

We need to find out who can influence Ms. Bender. She has friends on the Williamstown City Council. She was named Entrepreneur of the Year.

We need the City Council and lots of people in Williamstown to see that the wetlands has value—maybe even more than the casino—in terms of property values, quality of life, recreational opportunities, etc.

Ms. Bender intends to build her casino at the far end of the existing parking lot. So why fill the wetlands?

A reporter from the Parkersburg News and Sentinel is gathering information and plans to write a story about this issue. Not sure of the timing.

She’s being sued by someone who was injured on the wetlands boardwalk.

Can’t a community organization get together and pay for insurance for the wetlands area?

How much would it cost per year?

Ms. Bender wants to make big money from the casino. She’s probably not making that much with the restaurant.

Some in attendance were concerned about “showing cards” to the land owner too soon. She will push back. We should aim to avoid an “us vs. them” situation.

Let’s encourage her to build her casino at Harbor Point, the new development (in the floodplain between Williamstown and Henderson Hall). Land or rent there would be too costly.

Ms. Bender sees other businesses and private property owners destroying wetlands, so why should she be prohibited from doing so?

Williamstown Wetland is one of just 21 designated wetlands in the entire state of WV.

At a recent Williamstown City Council meeting recently, Ms. Bender said she’d ask Sen. Joe Manchin for a waiver. He has ties to Williamstown, somehow. He and a previous mayor were tight.

The owner of the wetlands across the street from Williamstown wetland has somehow received a permit to fill in that wetlands at a rate of 15 square feet per year (or something like that). How did he get that permission? Furthermore, he’s using contaminated materials to fill it!

Some have complained that the Williamstown Wetland is neglected. Ms. Bender does not wish to be forced to maintain her private property.

We need Williamstown residents to get involved, and to contact their city council. Doing so will be effective.

We need to get a copy of the original agreement with the Women’s Club.

West Virginia residents ought to write to Senator Manchin praising the wetland and asking him not to grant any waiver or permits for its destruction. Also Gov. Justice. The wetlands, however, is regulated by the federal Clean Water Act.

The WVLT has been in touch with the WV DNR. They are already aware of the issue.

Private land owners have the right to fill 1/10 of an acre without a permit. Larger than that, land owners must obtain a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers, and underwrite mitigation. (Williamstown wetlands is 3 acres or more.) Mitigation is usually extremely expensive.

Is Ms. Bender aware of the requirement to pay for mitigation? Maybe that’s the “waiver” she is seeking from Sen. Manchin.

Keith Krantz is the WV DNR employee who helped establish the wetlands 15 years ago.

A friend of Ms. Benders needs to ask her if she is willing to talk to the land trust.

One of the attendees is good friends of the parents of one of Manchin’s interns. She’ll ask the intern if she will find out what Manchin knows about the situation, and whether Ms. Bender has approached him already.

Has Ms. Bender retained legal advisors? We don’t know.

It was Marty Sofer (?) who encouraged Williamstown to become a Bee City USA. He might still be on Williamstown City Council. He gathered a large group of residents to make that happen.

One person in attendance is an acquaintance of Ms. Bender. He will ask her if she’ll talk to WV Land Trust reps.

Nobody thinks a confrontation will be productive. We should start now to aim for a win/win.

Meanwhile, write letters to Manchin, Justice, and the Army Corps of Engineers, and contact city council. At present, letters to the editor might be taken as confrontational.

We need to find connections to Chris Bender, and get Williamstown residents to oppose the wetlands destruction.

We need to figure out the costs of mitigation, and find out if she has legal representation.

The meeting disconnected around 8:15 p.m.