This afternoon, I attended the Williamstown Women’s Club to discuss the Williamstown Wetlands, and its owner’s unstated plans to fill it. Eight people attended (including two men!). All in attendance appeared to oppose Chris Bender’s plan.

In attendance: Sheila Jackson, Edie Lindley, Pam and Fred Cannon, Pat Calebaugh, Kittie Clark, D.J. Allen, Jim Waybright, and myself. Ms. Allen works for the Resource Conservation and Development Office in Parkersburg. She has lots of files on this project, going back into the 1960s, some of which are attached.

Mr. Waybright long ago owned the wetlands (prior to DaVinci’s)!

The following notes are the highlights.

Ms. Clark said Chris Bender went to a planning commission meeting last night to seek a variance. Apparently, (by city ordinance?) casino’s must be at least 1,000 feet apart. Davinci’s is less than 1,000 feet from at least one casino. There are already three in downtown Williamstown.

[Note: I (Dawn) have a friend (Martha McGovern) who serves on the Williamstown Planning Commission. This evening, Martha told me that the plan commission did not meet last night, and that they have heard nothing from Ms. Bender.]

Ms. Bender must get approval planning committee to get approval from it before going to city council, but she has attended several city council meetings recently. She has not publicly stated her plans for the wetlands.

[Martha said the Plan Commission can only makes recommendations to City Council. They have no real permitting power.]

Pam Cannon went to Mayor Paul Jordan to discuss. He shrugged and said “Oh well, it’s her land.”

The wetlands is one of just 21 designated wetlands in the state.

Ms. Allen, and possibly several other members of the club were involved in the work done on the wetlands many years go. Ms. Allen’s notes show that Bill Robinson, who was with the (WV?) Department of Transportation (or Highways), upon completion of the first improvements, said “This is the premier wetlands east of the Mississippi.” (Possibly referring to its accessibility to the public, educational value.)

Fred Cannon started a Facebook group a few weeks ago in support of the wetlands. He advocates spreading the word, making this a public topic of conversation. A gun range south of town once got approval under the table. He’s afraid that’s what will happen here. “Nothing happens until somebody stands up and says “This is wrong.” There is a mailing list, Friends of the Wetlands!

According to Michael Schramm and Vic Elam, Ms. Bender is permitted to fill in wetlands 1/10 acre per year. But she’s got to mitigate it. $180,000 per acre cost to mitigate.

Storm water drains into the wetlands. Will drain onto casino or parking lot of wetlands is drained!

Ms. Clark said Rod Smith (a Williamstown resident who was NOT at this meeting) contacted Elizabeth Byers, Senior Wetland Scientist with the WV Department of Environmental Protection, Watershed Assessment Branch. She is an ally and advocate. It was Mr. Smith who first alerted Michael Schramm of the threat to the wetlands.

Ms. Clark said that Dr. Brent Bradley, WV Land Trust, expressed interest in purchasing wetlands at fair market price. They buy land, but don’t hold it.

**Ms. Allen said the wetlands received around $95,000 in grants for improving “the swamp.”**

In accordance with a signed contract with the previous owners, the Williamstown Women’s Club paid insurance on the wetlands, and maintained the trail, benches, etc. The Women’s Club would be happy to continue the contract, but Ms. Bender refused to sign it in 2017.

**Several members of the Women’s Club plan to write a letter to Chris Bender today (Wednesday, November 11) asking if it is true that she aims to fill the wetlands. If she responds and admits to her plan, they hope hundreds of people will attend the next City Council meeting on Tuesday, November 17.**

There have been two signed agreements with department of highways for grants. **Kanawha RC&D is considered sponsor**, working with Women’s club. The Woman’s club is not in the agreement with DoH. “**Sponsor agrees that future sale or transfer of title ... within 10 years, requires prior approval of department, and could involve repayment.” Project ended 2012.** DoH has had turnover, so the office is challenging to work with. **The RC&D might have to repay $80,000 in federal grants if wetland is filled!! Chris Bender wouldn’t have to repay, RC&D would have to repay—they were sponsor of grant.**

**Department of Highways determines whether funds would have to be repaid. We have 2 years left on this.**  RC&D wants it to be kept a wetlands.

**What if Ms. Bender starts work on filling it in during the middle of the night? Who would they call? We need a plan. First call Department of Env. Protection, then Army Corps** to check for permit on file.

**Enforcement on private land is difficult or impossible.** Does Williamstown have zoning or other land use controls? Would Ms. Bender be permitted to build a slaughterhouse on the site? A landfill?

**Mr. Cannon: Maybe all Ms. Bender wants is easier access to the restaurant—from Waverly Road. Can we give her easier access to without disturbing wetlands?** That could be a win-win.

But if she has big plan in her mind, let’s piss her of. Let’s make her mad!

She wants access for busses to come in—to her grand casino.

We need to speak up!

Ms. Cannon: We need to put together a letter signed by concerned citizens to Chris: We want you to keep wetlands, happy to help you improve access to restaurant.

**Mark Mondo is putting in a nice restaurant and casino. She’s afraid of losing business.**

DiVinci’s is valuable resource to Williamstown. So is wetlands.

**Ms. Clark: Let’s go with soft approach, first.**

Mr. Cannon has been in touch with Parkersburg News Sentinel about the issue, but nothing has been in the newspaper so far. (Ms. Bender hasn’t publicly confirmed her plans yet—that’s probably why.)

Mr. Cannon: Let’s go to council on Tuesday. Let’s confront Chris, or this will all move under the table. We’re too old to be patient.

Ms. Clark: We should all start writing letters to the editor. We should also write to Army Corps of Engineers to urge them to deny any permit request they may receive to fill the wetlands.

Casey Cowan in charge of runoff into Ohio River, WV DNR.

Mr. Cannon: Let’s just ask Chris, in a letter, what she’s up to. She needs to know that there are concerned citizens. The city knows what happens to water when it rains. They understand the importance of the wetlands. Storm sewers are constantly plugged up already!

Pam will call Linda Myers (plan commission member) as soon as she gets home.