**The Threat to Williamstown Wetlands and What You Can Do**

**Background**

DaVinci’s owner, Chris Bender, is planning to build a 3,600 sq.ft. banquet facility (also called a convention center, or a casino) on the unpaved land at the far back of her parking lot. She says the gaming area will be a 10x10-foot room housing five video gambling machines. The rest of the building will be a banquet facility.

Williamstown has an ordinance prohibiting gambling facilities from locating within 1,000 feet of another gaming facility, and this facility would violate that code. Ms. Bender petitioned for a variance before the Williamstown Board of Zoning Appeals on December 7. Her petition is under consideration.

She will present her plans to the Williamstown Planning Commission on December 28. To date, the plans she has announced publicly have focused exclusively on building the building. However, she has mentioned privately that because entering and exiting DaVinci’s parking lot from Highland Avenue can be a problem, she hopes to get permission for an alternate entrance off of Waverly Road, as well as an expanded parking area to serve the banquet facility. She does expect tourist buses. So, for the entrance road and for expanded parking, she plans to fill the wetlands (she has stated off the record).

It seems like her strategy is to carry this out incrementally: getting permission for a tax-revenue-generating commercial expansion, and once that facility is well under way, to fill the wetlands.

**Opinions**

A letter to the editor was published December 19 in the Marietta times opposing another gambling facility in Williamstown: <https://www.mariettatimes.com/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/2020/12/another-gambling-place/> and signed by a representative of “Committee of Concerned Citizens of Williamstown.” The Williamstown Women’s Club, which, for many years, paid for insurance and maintenance of the wetlands also is actively in favor of protecting the wetlands.

A petition supporting Ms. Bender’s efforts and economic growth Williamstown is collecting signatures: <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/865/211/242/help-support-williamstown-growth/?taf_id=67090399&cid=fb_na#bbfb=938654173>

While the petition has several dozen signatories so far, there seem to be many and varied outspoken voices on Facebook and at Williamstown public meetings:

* + For encouraging economic development in Williamstown
	+ Against more gambling in Williamstown
	+ Allowing a property owner to do whatever she wants with her land
	+ Drain and fill the swamp!
	+ Protect Williamstown Wetlands

At present, each time protecting the wetlands is brought up in public meetings, it is quelled with “That’s not the topic at hand.”

**Contact Williamstown Officials**

Below is a sample letter that the author has sent to the home addresses of each Williamstown Planning Commission member. You could use it for inspiration, but please don’t copy word-for-word:

Dear\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

We are writing to you in your capacity as a member of the Williamstown Planning Commission regarding the matter of the gambling variance requested by the owners of DaVinci’s Restaurant.

The undersigned believe that much more is at stake besides the gambling variance in question (though we are firmly opposed to any more gambling facilities in our area). We believe that the “convention center” of which this gambling facility is but a small part, will spell the end of the wetland which is on DaVinci’s property.

Building a convention center that will seat 200 people will require adding a large number of parking spaces. The building itself will take up a significant footprint of the existing parking lot. Unless this building will have a separate kitchen, it will be necessary to join it to the existing buildings. We think that in the final analysis, AFTER the building is built, filling the wetland will be the only way to solve the ‘parking crisis’.

So we urge you to consider this project in its entirety when granting this variance. If the long-term plan is to fill the wetland, then that is something that should be acknowledged up front to the public.

Martha McGovern, who serves on the Williamstown Planning Commission, consulted with Paula Rankin (administrative assistant for the City of Williamstown), said that the most expeditious method for contacting Williamstown officials is send an email to williamstown@suddenlinkmail.com with “To: Mayor, City Council and Planning Commission” in the Subject line. That email will go to the Clerk, and copies will be distributed to Mayor Paul Jordan, members of City Council, and members of the Planning Commission.

If you would rather send a letter, you can address it to

Mayor Paul Jordan, Members of City Council and Members of Planning Commission

City of Williamstown

100 West Fifth Street

Williamstown, WV   26187