

Flood Plain Waiver of Storm Water Regulations proposed for Academy Park

The Administration has proposed waiving Storm Water Regulations for the reconstruction of Academy Park. The City is presently without a Director of Engineering and that absence has perhaps contributed to the missing history of the area, a history of severe floodplain violations and direct danger to the residents of Camrose Court.

South of and adjacent to Academy Park is a Gahanna owned property. About 30 acres, as I recall, it is the inside of a Big Walnut Creek meander. Consequently, it regularly flooded and therefore was rich productive farmland until the 1960's. The land was then purchased by a group of three or four local individuals. The Ohio EPA was founded in 1972 so environment oversight at that time was nil or minimal at best. The group made an overture to the Columbus Water Plant proposing to accept the Water Plant's waste. Columbus accepted. The group then had the soil bulldozed into a dyke along the shoreline of Big Walnut. This created a 30-acre bowl and the Columbus Water Treatment Plant's lime and alum slurry began to be dumped on site. That continued for some period of years until the bowl was full. The depth of the white material varies. In some places, the slurry is 17 feet deep. The fill does not dewater, so it is slippery. Even bulldozers cannot traverse it. It is not a hazardous substance. In the early 1980's the creek over topped the dyke and Big Walnut flowed white for miles.

A sequence of developers purchased the property. Each thought it would be a great site for residential development. I started with the City in 1983 and came with a science background from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. The first time I talked with an owner, I investigated the property and discovered its history. I then explained to the developer that it could not be developed, but I would suggest City Council purchase the property from him at his purchase price. Of course, he did not want to believe that he had bought a white elephant. He then sent a backhoe out to the site to dig test holes. The backhoe became stuck and had to be towed back to regular soil. After some time, he sold the property to another developer. The same discussion occurred and the same experience was had with a backhoe. Another period lapsed and another developer came into the office. Once more the conversation and the stuck backhoe occurred. After a year or so, that developer accepted our offer. Council purchased the property.

It is an interesting park to walk. There is an old dump truck bed there, now overgrown. The high PH precludes many plant species and dwarfs or injures others, so it is a strange land.

During the nineties and early years of this new century, I would often discover groups of kids building and riding upon their own skills trail. "Don't you guys get hurt on these jumps?", I would ask. "No, we don't get hurt. Well, Billy broke an arm and Josh sprained his ankle. But we don't get hurt", was their answer. Their family's digging tools were strewn about the site, but they really were enjoying themselves and hurting nothing. Parks staff let them continue their adventures. It is a great open space and provides shelter and bedding for a large herd of deer.

Contemporaneously, the residents of Camrose Court requested help. Their backyards end at a cliff, and the yards were caving into the Big Walnut Creek below. Camrose Court is across the Big Walnut Creek from Academy Park and the adjacent 30 acres discussed above. The erosion was severe and the cliff was marching toward their homes. We took engineers out to look at it, and they indicated that a correction would be hundreds of thousands of dollars, or more.

What was causing this catastrophic erosion? We looked at the hydrology. The 30 acres of fill (done in the 1960's) at the south of Academy Park displaced millions of gallons of flood storage capacity. It also concentrated the erosive power of the Big Walnut Creek. Prior to the fill, the flood waters could spread out across the 30 acres thereby dissipating the energy. After the filling, the Big Walnut flood waters were confined to the narrow channel, and its immense energy was cutting away the cliff bank.

Modern engineering practices were vastly expensive. Yet the city could not let a dozen homes fall into Big Walnut creek. The city applied the "George Palmetter Erosion Control techniques" as recommended by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. You may read about those techniques by googling the title. It involves a labor-intensive creation of a toe at the base of the slope, and it worked. It is a fragile solution, generally applied to rural lands. It is holding for the present and has protected the homes for many years.

Of course, the City wants to do nothing to endanger the wonderful residential homes of Camrose Court. Failing to uphold our Flood Storage Regulations will increase the aggressive and enormous erosive energy of the Big Walnut Creek. We request that the plan be revised to come into compliance with the well-thought-out laws of the City of Gahanna and thereby protect the residents of Camrose Court, as well as all Gahanna neighbors.

Sincerely,

Jim McGregor

