

The “Friends of Five Mile Woods”: A local example of community activism and long-term service

John H. Heilferty, Naturalist

The “Friends of Five Mile Woods” are a volunteer organization with origins dating back to the early 1980’s. Among its founding members were the very residents who formed the “Save Our Woods Committee” in the late 1970’s. That group spearheaded the original grass-roots efforts to save what the community already referred to as “the five mile woods” from development following the announcement of the sale of lands owned by the primary landowner, Penn Central Railroad. The Save Our Woods Committee’s efforts were significant, multi-faceted and – thankfully - successful, resulting in the passage of a Township referendum in 1978 to purchase the original properties that would become what we now enjoy as a nearly 300-acre nature preserve.

Following the successful campaign to preserve the Woods, members of the Save our Woods Committee remained active and committed to supporting the Township’s efforts to establish a system of trails and public amenities within the Preserve. In recognition of the groups passion and dedication to the woods, the earliest draft management plans for the new nature preserve included recommendations that a formal “friends” group be created to assist the Township in the property’s stewardship and continued expansion. Thus, the “Friends of Five Mile Woods” was established. The group held its first public meeting in 1981 and by 1984 was officially chartered by the Township. A Township supervisor was assigned a role as an official liaison with the Friends, and close and lasting ties were established between the Friends of Five Mile Woods and the Parks and Recreation Board.

Over 35 years later, there are still members of the Friends of Five Mile Woods who were among the founders of the “Save Our Woods Committee” so many years earlier. And while these persons might not be the members who today are still running chain saws, clearing debris or maintaining our lengthy trail system, the Friends who are active in the woods today are every bit as passionate, dedicated and hard working as those impressive founding members. The primary effort of the Friends is reflected in their holding monthly volunteer workdays on the second Saturday of every month from March through November. During these events, Friends pick up trash on trails, parking lots and along road fronts, maintain and clear trails, remove downed trees, and repair bridges and boardwalks. All the while, Friends are simultaneously introducing new volunteers, that often include members of local school groups, to the beauty and biology of the Preserve. It should almost be forewarned that attendees at a workday will neither be spared the honest toil associated with hours-long mid-summer trail maintenance nor the peaceful enlightenment of a spontaneous education program initiated when a work group happens upon a blooming orchid or scurrying wood frog. For each member or attendee, there typically ends up being a unique, personal “give” and “take” during any given workday. And in every case, the hard work “given” and the various, personal nature experiences “taken” by attendees are a product of the core group of Friends of Five Mile Woods who organize, run and – invariably - *educate* during each workday.

But the Friends are not merely about workdays. The Friends of Five Mile Woods consider education (and not merely what they can cram into a workday!) to be an important component of their public service. The Friends are instrumental in contributing to the nature artifacts that adorn the Preserve nature center, available for visitors to observe, touch and learn from. The Friends also host several public education events at the Preserve throughout the calendar year, as well as several events in the community. In early spring, the Friends host a Maple Syrup Demonstration, where over the course of 6

to 8 hours they will demonstrate how sugar maple sap is patiently boiled down into delicious maple syrup. A frog and salamander walk is held in early spring as well, followed by a Earth Day Open house where members of the public can visit the headquarters, observe and learn about the many nature artifacts on display or a few wildlife species on display in tanks, and partake in one of several hour-long guided tours of the Preserve led by knowledgeable members of the Friends. The Friends participate in both Lower Makefield Township's Community Pride Day as well as the Harvest Day event in Yardley Borough, using both opportunities to get the word out about the Preserve, solicit interest in the Friends of Five Mile Woods, and to invite them to upcoming public events. Which quickly leads to a Fall Open House held in late-September every year where once again, members of the Friends greet the public with information about nature center artifacts, critters in tanks and offer guided tours of the Preserve.

The Friends manage to throw in occasional education programs or field trips throughout the year as well, exploring subjects that include local wildflowers, mushrooms or wildlife species such as birds or bats. They also respond to public inquiries about the Preserve, solicit assistance from other volunteer groups and manage a fund where occasional donations are welcomed, and that typically contribute towards new educational materials or helps cover the cost of participation at public events.

For over 35 years, the Friends have been a very active, uniquely devoted community group dedicated to furthering the preservation, stewardship, public use and responsible enjoyment of the Five Mile Woods Preserve. The value to the Township, in labor and effort donated, is extraordinary and has, over the years, remained a "constant" notwithstanding the various changes in leadership and direction that are inherent to any township government. Quite simply, there would not be a "Five Mile Woods Preserve," nor would the Preserve today be as capably managed and maintained, were it not for a passionate group of area residents, initially committed to "saving our woods," and forever dedicated to being the "Friends of Five Mile Woods."