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An Anacostia Watershed Treasure Rediscovered— and Imperiled

To the editor:

One of the wildest and most unique natural areas accessible by Metro is also one of the most threatened. Just over the guard rail from the Greenbelt Metro Station parking lot in Greenbelt, Maryland, the braided channels of Indian Creek meander toward the Anacostia River through the last remnants of historic Hollywood Swamp. In 1919 the Smithsonian documented the southern floodplain forest assemblage that thrives today: swamp chestnut oaks, massive red maples, and black gums still dominate an understory of buttonbush, viburnum, smooth winterberry holly, and sweet pepperbush (*Clethra alnifolia*), which until this fall was thought to be lost from the D.C. area. A walk this October revealed that, despite the summer's drought, the creek's channels supported a vibrant array of submerged and emergent aquatic vegetation, including the rare cattail sedge, and bog chickweed, a plant which had never before been reported from the region. The pools, riffles, backwater meadows, and ponds are habitat for many species of reptiles, amphibians, fishes, and dragonflies. Deer, fox, and neighborhood children on nature expeditions are common denizens. The floodplain teems with birds, from warblers to red-shouldered hawks to wood ducks. In fact, when the Capital Beltway was first built, it was here that the first bluebird nest inside the Beltway was found.

This gem of untrammelled land, some of it even without footpaths, is at the core of a 240-acre tract that Metroland Development Corporation, L.L.C., proposes to develop into a 1.8 million square foot upscale mall, offices, convention center, condos, retirement community, and a lake. Much of the site is within the 100-year floodplain of Indian Creek. About 128 acres or 43 percent of the site are wetlands, and woodlands cover 97 acres, about 32 percent of the site. The proposed development would require a new Beltway interchange between Kenilworth Avenue and Route 1. The tract is a long rectangle from the Beltway on the north to Greenbelt Road on the south, bounded on the east by Cherrywood Lane and on the west by the CSX and Metro train tracks. Greenbelt Metro Station occupies the northwest corner of the site with an access road from Cherrywood Lane and a partial Beltway interchange serving commuters from I-95. The 40-acre Metro parking lot was built on wetlands against the objections of environmentalists, and the development and purchase rights for the parking lot were sold to Metroland in September. One of the key partners in Metroland, A.H. Smith and Associates, owns the rest of the tract. The residential communities of Greenbelt, College Park, and Berwyn Heights abut the land. Across Cherrywood Lane at Greenbelt Road sits Beltway Plaza, a rambling local mall in need of revitalization.

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Indian Creek

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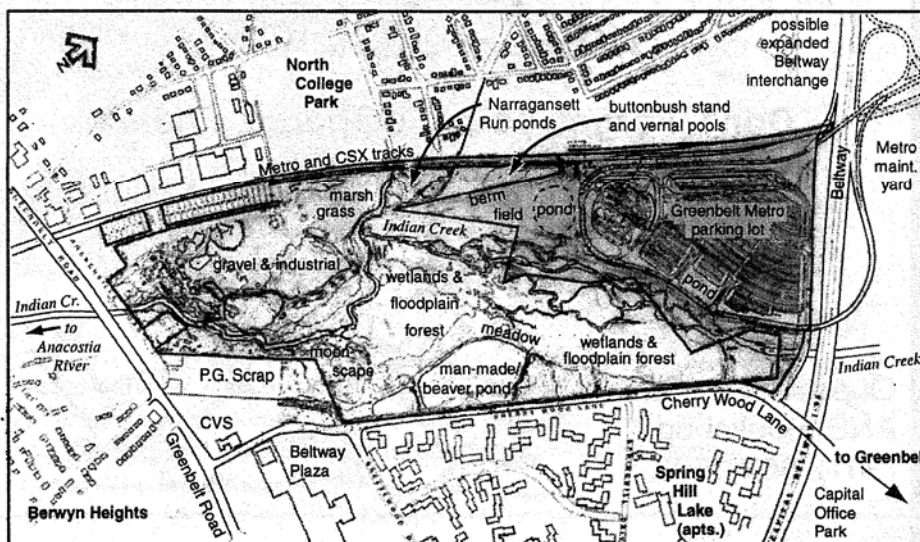
The southern end of the site has for nearly a century been used for open pit gravel mining and concrete operations. Many acres of wetlands have been degraded or filled completely, the braids of Indian Creek gradually channelized, and the waters muddied by tons of unregulated sediment. In one place, concrete mixer trucks have been dumping leftover concrete for so long that a mountain thirty feet high rises from the creek bank and spreads over acres, pouring a steady stream of alkaline silt into Indian Creek. A network of dirt motorcycle trails has flattened stretches of streambank and torn up the forest floor in some wooded areas. Downstream of Greenbelt Road the Army Corps of Engineers has channelized and in many places bermed and deforested the floodplain all the way to the Anacostia River.

Upstream of the mining area, though, the floodplain forest and wetlands perform their natural floodwater control function by slowing down and spreading out rainwater and harboring niches for native plants and animals that clean the water. The channels of Indian Creek and the silty forested floodplain are still recognizable as the Hollywood Swamp.

In 1881 the Smithsonian surveyed the flora of the Washington, D.C. area for the first time and returned in 1919 to find many natural areas disappearing under housing developments. But the Hollywood Swamp, once a connected series of swamps stretching from Hyattsville to Beltsville along the Indian Creek floodplain, still held "much of interest." The swamp chestnut oak forest represents a finger of a southern community that extends up the Anacostia River and its tributaries. Southern leopard frogs at the northern boundary of their range are common in the wetlands, while northern species like the bog chickweed enrich the community. The history of Indian Creek includes its use as an Indian trade route from at least colonial times. The archaeological sites all along the creek banks are considered significant.

Riding the Green Line Metro train south out of Greenbelt station gives a good orientation to the site. Just below the station beaver, turtles, and herons grace the two ponds and vernal pools right next to the tracks. Next, a huge field of towering *Phragmites* grass grows on a flat field and crowds around the rusting gravel yard towers and conveyor belts. Across the field one can see the line of trees where Indian Creek runs parallel to the tracks. A couple of small office buildings and active gravel piles give way to a few light industrial

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Indian River

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buildings just before the tracks pass under Greenbelt Road.

The variety of habitats makes the site great for birding, and one of the best spots is next to the Metro tracks just below the station in a dense stand of buttonbush. Casual birding throughout the site this fall has tallied Indigo Bunting; Blue Grosbeak; Song, Swamp, Field, Fox, White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows; Eastern Bluebird; American Goldfinch; Pileated, Red-bellied, Downy, and Hairy Woodpeckers; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; Northern Flicker; Belted Kingfisher; Winter and Carolina Wrens; Eastern Phoebe; Hermit Thrush; Rufous-sided Towhee; Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets; flocks of Palm and Myrtle Warblers; Yellow-rumped Warbler; Blue-headed Vireo; Red-shouldered Hawk; Great Horned Owl feathers; Merlin; American and Fish Crows; Blue Jay; Northern Cardinal; Northern Mockingbird; Gray Catbird; Dark-eyed Junco; American Robin; and, of course, Carolina Chickadee and Tufted Titmouse.

On spring nights a magnificent chorus of spring peepers welcomes commuters when they return to the station. In floodtime the creek fills the woods with muddy water from Cherrywood Lane to the parking lot, leaving islands and pools for the frogs when the water recedes. On the streambank one can find fresh green raccoon scat full of tiny fish bones and crushed crayfish shells. On late nights a beaver might be seen tracing Vs across the overflow pond in the parking lot, where it must climb through a grate to reach the cattails and saplings inside

the chainlink fence. This year a doe raised twin fawns on the lush grasses of hidden meadows, and Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Canada Geese serenade the summer. The forest life seems to spill out over the parking lot as if trying to take it back.

One might wonder why there isn't already a nature center for the neighborhood children, but development appears to have been in the planning for years. The whole tract is zoned I-2, or heavy industrial, and a law passed in April by the Prince George's County Council amends the uses allowed in industrial zones to include a Metro Planned Community of at least 150 acres. The law spells out in exhaustive detail the number of parking spaces, condos with vaulted ceilings and marble entryways, fitness gyms, offices, and specific upscale retail stores required to qualify as a Metro Planned Community. The developer must show a letter of intent from at least one prestigious department store before submitting a plan. The other commercial and residential elements follow.

Meanwhile, the Prince George's County Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission has held four charrettes, or public planning meetings, between April and October of this year, to involve citizens in amending the Greenbelt Metro Area Sector of the county's zoning plan. The charrette participants *overwhelmingly* voted to adopt the greenest of four proposed land use concepts for the 240-acre site, which would preserve a 138-acre environmental envelope around the most sensitive parts of Indian Creek and limit development primarily to the Metro parking lot and the downstream industrial sites. Language in M-NCPPC's literature about the site and

the planning process states that “stewardship of the Chesapeake Bay and the land is a universal ethic” and emphasizes “environmentally sensitive development and redevelopment.”

At Metroland’s October 15 press conference, citizens learned that Metroland has not incorporated the charrette’s land use concept into its own vision even though its representative participated in every charrette. Their drawings indicated the entire site would be bulldozed, Indian Creek would be relocated, and the wetlands would be submerged by a lake. The developer’s publicity packet touts “magnificent recreational facilities highlighted by Indian Creek Park. Named for Indian Creek, which flows through the property, this beautiful stream valley park will run the length of the development. With tree-lined waterfront promenade, biking and jogging trails, walking paths, paddle boating and a pier, Indian Creek Park’s design and facilities will maintain the integrity of the natural drainage of the existing floodplain and satisfy requirements for the preservation of the natural environment.”

Yet none of Indian Creek’s own

channels would remain, its course would be moved for the convenience of buildings, and a diverse, historically documented habitat would be replaced by another artificial lake. Even the name, Indian Creek Park, is co-opted from an effort by local citizens to protect Indian Creek’s remaining natural channels and wetlands above the Beltway.

Metroland promises to follow regulations on wetland and floodplain mitigation, but a fragmented wetland or mitigation pond cannot replace a mature floodplain forest or support picky plants that rely on the whole ecosystem for their well-being. They propose an environmental education area “to teach kids about the Anacostia watershed and what we can do to restore it.” But the best way to restore it is not to destroy another inch of the Anacostia’s vital wetlands and functioning, historic floodplain forest. What the Anacostia watershed and its residents don’t need is to lose the last piece of the Hollywood Swamp inside the Beltway and sacrifice the natural beauty of Indian Creek.

Kate Spencer is a scientific illustrator and naturalist concerned with documenting and protecting the biodiversity of the metropolitan region.