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## WATERSHED

## Cheltenham residents fear a proposed housing development could increase flooding along Tookany Creek

By [Emily Rizzo](#) · April 10, 2022

 Elkins Park residents are fighting a development they believe would increase flooding along the Tookany Creek. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

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Fears are brewing among Cheltenham Township residents over a proposed development along Tookany Creek in Montgomery County.

The proposed construction of eight townhomes would demolish woodlands, and lie along a FEMA-identified floodplain and wetland on 222 Church Road.


Residents say they are worried the development would lead to increased water runoff in an area that is already prone to flooding.

Over 100 residents attended Cheltenham's Public Works Committee meeting on Wednesday, April 6, to voice opposition to the project. The committee then gave preliminary approval of the development.

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The Elkins Park Neighborhood Coalition created a petition against the development that 1,321 community members have signed.



 Wetlands around the Tookany Creek in Elkins Park, Pa. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

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### COMMUNITY

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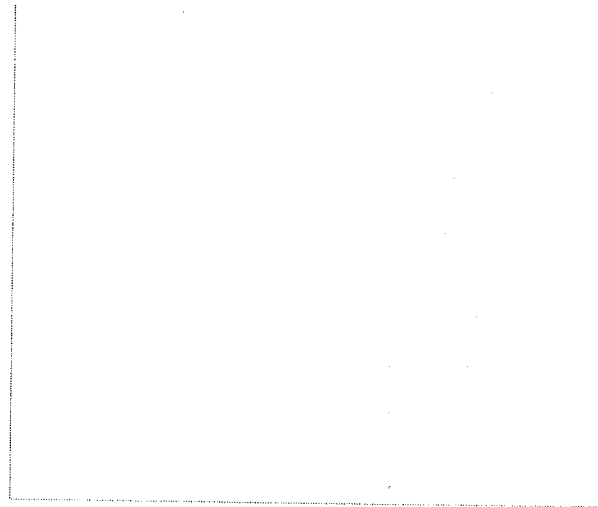
Cheltenham has a long history of flooding, including in the residential areas neighboring the proposed development, and downstream along Tookany Creek. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers reported in 2015 that urbanization in Cheltenham has led to “increased stormwater runoff and floodplain recession leading to reduced carrying capacity for Tookany Creek.”

Zoë Slutzky grew up in the home next door to the proposed development — it’s her primary residence and where her mother still lives. Due to Tookany Creek overflow, they often experience flooding on the property, Slutzky said.

Water used to frequently fill her basement, before her family built a stone wall between their home and the creek.

But Slutzky has wider concerns for her community, and those who live downstream from her home.

Seeing the outpouring of concern from Cheltenham residents, Slutzky said she believes there's an "instinctive feeling" within the community that the proposed construction would be damaging to the neighborhood. "Making this development here, no matter how minor it seems, people know the fragility of this point in Elkins Park and in Cheltenham," Slutzky said.



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📷 Elkins Park residents (from left) Zoë Slutzky, Tom Conway, Betsy Conway and Eileen Rudnick, are concerned about a development they believe would increase flooding along the Tookany Creek. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

“There’s this larger concern that as climate change is getting worse, as infrastructure is aging, as the township is talking about sustainability, it is ushering in something extremely destructive. Both on a visceral level you can understand it, from looking at the site, and also by digging into the [development] plans.”

Sidney Kahn has dug into the plans as a member of Cheltenham’s Environmental Advisory Council and a township resident.

Kahn said he helped write Cheltenham’s Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance (SALDO), which the development is supposed to comply with.

“It’s very clear to me that even if they think they are complying with the [SALDO], which is highly dubious, they are certainly not in any way, shape, or form complying with the spirit of it,” Kahn said.

Slutzky said she believes that it’s a bit more cut and dry.



"At the Public Works meeting, it was made clear that the township was considering allowing wiggle room, allowing the developer to try to meet the requirements as best as possible," Slutzky said. "But that is not the law."


Cheltenham Township Commissioner Mitchell Zygmund-Felt, chair of the Public Works Committee, said the township expects the developer to "comply to the greatest degree" with the SALDO by the time the final proposal is submitted.

For David Bernstein, that's not enough. Bernstein also lives near the proposed project, and is the prior owner of the property. He sold the land before he knew the buyer was planning on developing the eight homes.

He said the misstep was due to "lack of diligence" on his part.

"I made a mistake. Shame on me. Bottom line," Bernstein said.



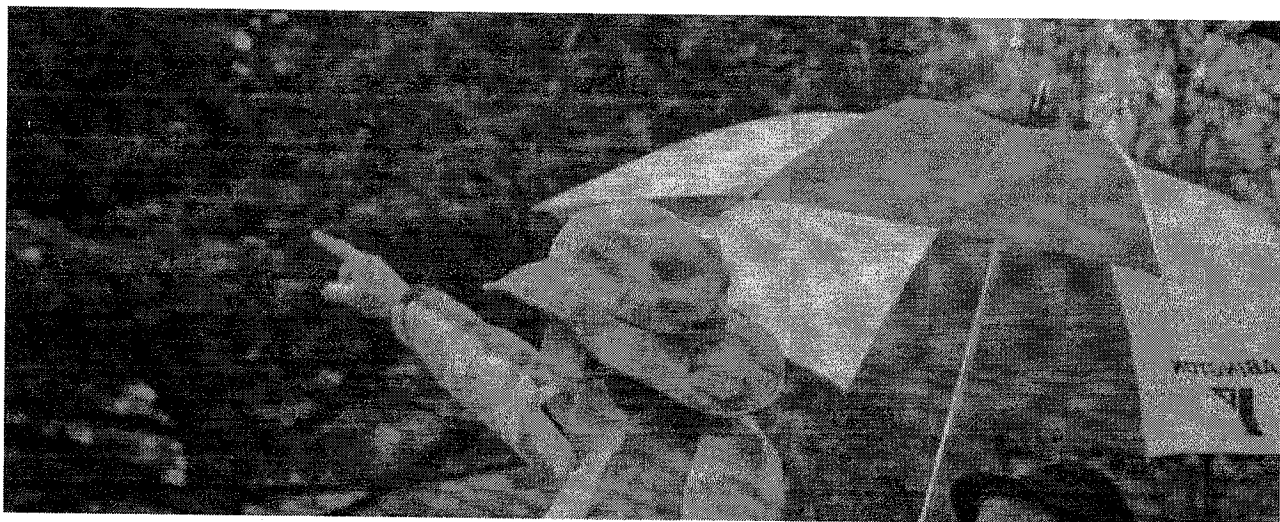
 222 Church Road, In Elkins Park, where a developer plans to build eight homes. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

Now, he said, he is "appalled" by the plans, so he hired a private engineer and lawyer to conduct an analysis of the developer's proposal.


Bernstein's engineer and lawyer both concluded that the current plan does not comply with the Pennsylvania's Stormwater Best Management Practices (BMP) manual "to the maximum extent practicable." That's just one piece of a 19-page list of issues the engineer found in the developer's plans.

Slutzky said it all feels like the township is moving backward.

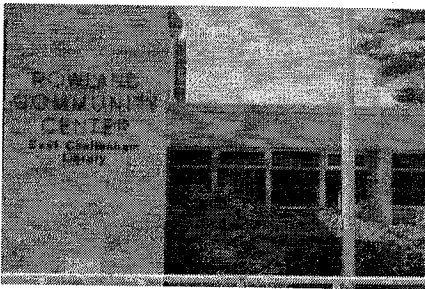
"The township has been touting its sustainability plans for a long time. The entire county has this 'Vision 2040,' and they're talking about re-naturalizing impervious surfaces and protecting vulnerable areas. This is doing the opposite. This is sort of pressing the rewind button on a lot of this progress," Slutzky said.





 Tom and Betsy Conway look out to where eight new homes are being developed near their home and the Tookany Creek in Elkins Park, Pa. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

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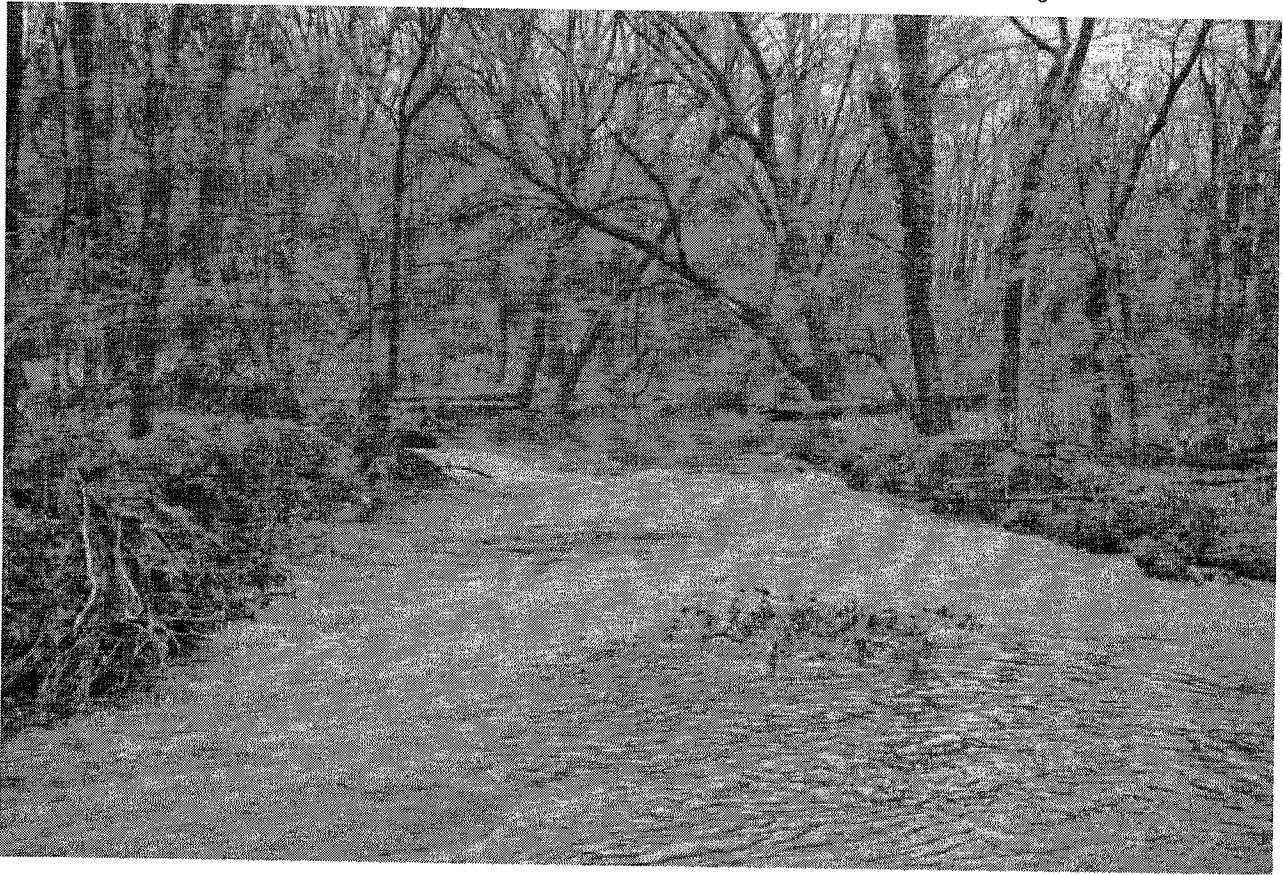
River floods are becoming larger and more common in the Northeast, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. A February 2022 study published in Nature Climate Change projected that the number of people in the United States who are exposed to flooding will almost double over the next 30 years. And Grist reports that development is largely to blame for increased flood risk.

The Montgomery County Planning Commission told WHYY that it is hoping to get just under \$500,000 in American Rescue Plan funds through the County's Recovery Office to put together a county-wide stormwater mitigation plan. The planning commission intends to look at all of Montgomery County's watersheds and point to issues that lead to flooding.

Two of the members of the commission are involved in the Tookany Creek development project. The project's engineer, Robert Blue, is a commission member, and the project's architect, Steven Kline, is the chair.

Blue did not respond to questions from WHYY before publication.





📷 Elkins Park residents that live near the Tookany Creek are concerned that a development in the area that will remove trees will increase flooding near their homes. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

When asked about residents' concerns about flooding brought on by the potential development, Montgomery County officials said "only a small sliver of the tract is in the floodplain."

The county also generally supports the development, and offered a review of the development to the township.

Cheltenham's contracted engineer also has a list of suggestions for the developer. Commissioner Zygmund-Felt said the township expects the developer to comply.

Julie Slavet, executive director of the Tookany/Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership, Inc., said the plan could better manage stormwater. TTF submitted a letter of recommendations to the township for improving the plan.


They hope to help the project not make the creek more distressed than it already is.

"The idea is that they're not making the problem worse," said Slavet. "Any impervious surface that they're adding, they're mitigating what this project will add to runoff."

Josh Buono, of Cheltenham, experiences frequent flooding on his property due to living downstream from development. He said he doesn't want to see problems like this get worse for his neighbors.

"I can't believe how bad it can get," Buono said. "We're worried our house is going to wash away."



 Elkins Park resident, Tom Conway, said he's seen the Tookany Creek flood over the New 2nd Street Bridge. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

Slavet said the Township needs to look for more long term stormwater mitigation solutions.

"It's not sustainable to keep building houses and pumping out people's basements. What makes the most sense is to get people out of harm's way into an area that isn't going to flood."

On April 20th, Cheltenham commissioners will take a final vote on the developer's proposal.



📷 Elkins Park neighbors Zoë Slutzky, Tom Conway, and Betsy Conway overlook the Tookany Creek near their homes where flooding has been a problem in the past. (Kimberly Paynter/WHYY)

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