

Twentymile Creek

Public Access

by Linda Steiner

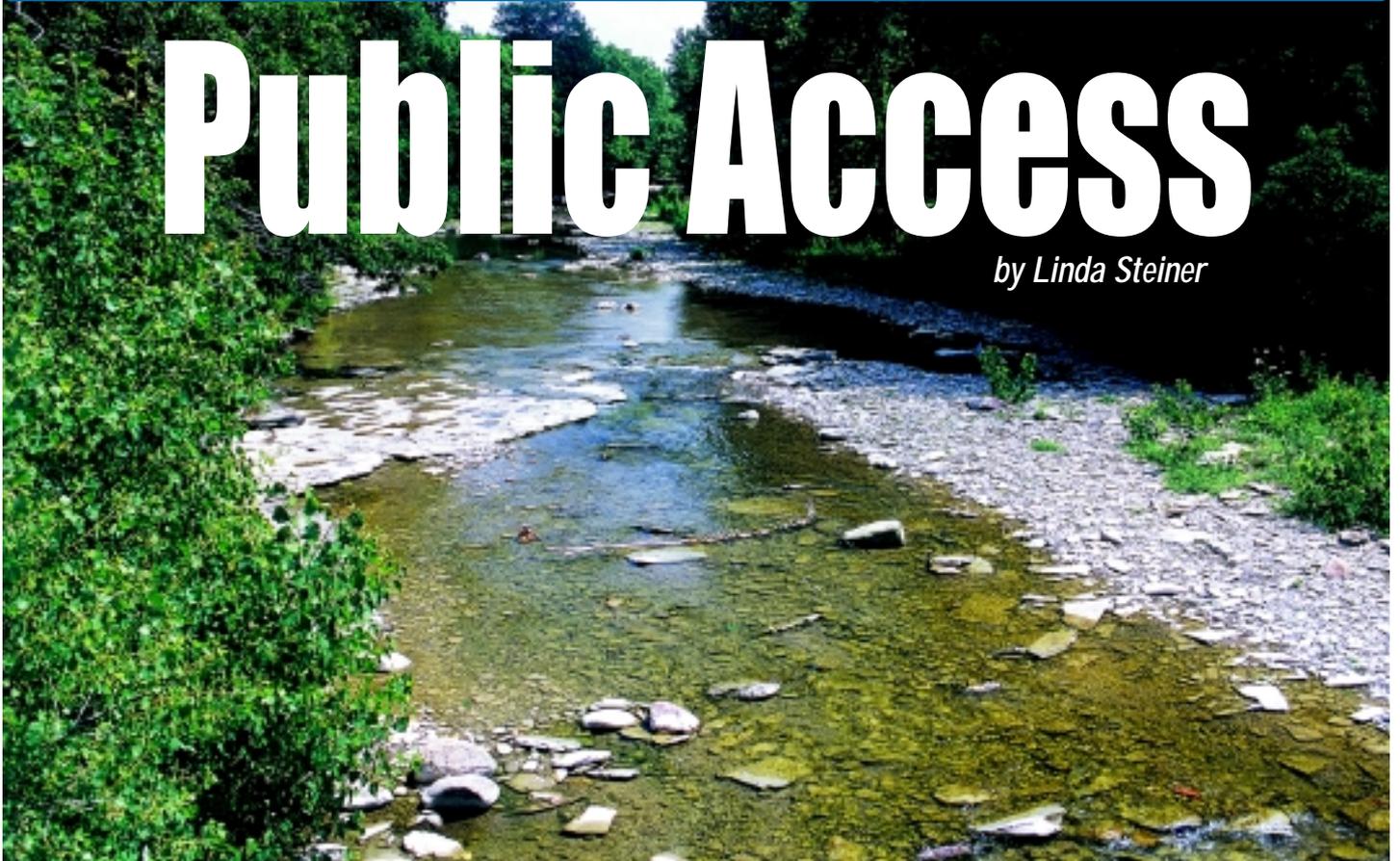


photo - Robert L. Steiner

“This was a passion, and I had to get it done,” said Sam.

Get what done?

“Come on, I’ll show you.”

The trip didn’t take long, about five minutes from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission marina at North East, in Erie County, heading east on Route 5. We turned left into a dirt lane, past an old white cottage with boarded windows.

“That was the caretaker’s home,” said Sam. “That might be torn down.”

The car bumped down the lane, through a tree-studded field, newly mowed. To the right, Twentymile Creek lay behind a woods row. More woods edged a parklike opening to our left. Ahead, an orange truck was stopped, just off the lane. Workers were trimming limbs, picking up fallen branches and mowing. They smiled and waved, and Sam waved back. The sign on the side of the truck said, “North

East Township.”

We passed a large red-sided building.

“According to the Township, that will stay,” said Sam. “It can be used for storage and such.”

The lane ended because it had to. Ahead was a cluster of tiny bungalows, also white and boarded up. Like the caretaker’s cottage, they wore the look of long disuse.

“As part of the Township’s plan, these bungalows will also be torn down,” said Sam.

The fated buildings weren’t what we had come to see. They weren’t what was important here.

We got out of the car and moved through an opening in the trees behind the cottages. Suddenly we were on a bright beach. Lake Erie spread a misty horizon to the north, toward Canada, shimmering dark blue far out. In the middle distance, the water was lighter, aquamarine. Whitecaps frisked. The waves slapping the shore were putty-colored,



Fish & Boat Commissioner Samuel M. Concilla surveys the Lake Erie shoreline from the Twentymile Creek public access project. The project conserves one of the last parcels of Lake Erie undeveloped beachfront on the Pennsylvania coast east of the city of Erie.

photo - Robert L. Steiner

pushed by wind and churning with sand and pebbles.

Sam pointed to the east, where the beach curved into the lake. Beyond was the mouth of Twentymile Creek, where the stream met journey's end. Crossing the beach to the creek bank, we peered into the glass-clear flow, on its way to the rambunctious lake. Then we gazed upstream, toward Route 5, seeing a peaceful creek framed by leafy green.

"I think this is just the prettiest stream," said Sam.

This, the lakefront and the creek, is what we had come to see. This was Sam's passion.

Sam is Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commissioner Samuel M. Concilla, of North East. The property we were standing on is part of a fisherman's tale with a successful conclusion, one that can be told now because, in large part, of Sam's determination.

Sam is quick to redirect the thanks to others. "Without the North East Township Board of Supervisors, this could not have happened," Sam said. "The persistence of the current board and past board members has characterized this cooperative effort from the start."

What exactly happened? Only the conservation of one of the last parcels of Lake Erie undeveloped beachfront on the Pennsylvania coast east of the city of Erie. Only the preservation for use by anglers and the general public of some 1,100

feet of lakeshore and nearly three-quarters of a mile of the best steelhead stream in the eastern part of the county.

The Fish & Boat Commission's role began in 1994 in Harrisburg. Governor Casey signed into law Act 1994-79, which amended the Fish and Boat Code to ban gill nets for commercial fishing in Lake Erie. The law included a provision to sell temporary Lake Erie angling permits, costing \$3 apiece, to raise money to pay recompense to gill net fishing licensees.

Lake Erie fishing permits were sold from 1995 through 1998, and the \$940,731 taken in was deposited in an account in the Fish Fund. The gill net licensees were recompensed, according to a formula set by law, and administrative costs were settled. That left about \$268,000 with no legal direction for its use.

Enter into the tale a bill in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, No. 1482, introduced by Representative John Evans, an Erie County legislator, in May 2001. Let a little over a year go by and the bill is signed into law as Act 101 of 2002. The Act's purpose is in its first paragraph, "further providing for the disposition of the proceeds from the special Lake Erie fishing permits." In other words, the remaining \$268,000 "shall be used to acquire property and to provide public fishing access on or at Lake Erie, its tributaries and

Presque Isle Bay.”

That, said Sam, was the first priority, especially east of Erie. Fortunately, a portion of the mouth of Twentymile Creek, near the New York border, was for sale. The North East Township Supervisors had expressed interest in obtaining the property for years for public use, but funding was a major obstacle. The 27-plus-acre parcel was owned by an Erie family and used as a vacation spot with cottage rentals.

In fall 2001, Sam approached the North East Township Supervisors with the idea of developing a partnership and an offer to support the Township's requests for funding assistance to secure access to Twentymile Creek and Lake Erie. The bill for disposition of the remaining Lake Erie fishing permit funds was moving in Harrisburg and the availability of other money was likely. The importance of Twentymile Creek to anglers could not be overstated, as well as the need for angler parking off busy Route 5.

Sam said he envisions a broader plan, consistent with Act 101 of 2002, to enhance angler access in Erie County beyond just the Twentymile Creek site. The North East Township property is just the first of several Erie County partnership projects in which the Commission hopes to participate.

On July 25, 2002, a ceremonial check for \$100,000 from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's Lake Erie Fund

was presented to North East Township for the Twentymile Creek public access project. Township officials, legislators, media and Commission Executive Director Peter A. Colangelo were there, as was Sam. Sam gave high marks especially to State Representative Evans and state senators Jane Earll and Bob Robbins for their help, as well as supervisors Dennis Culver, Julia Gorniak and Roy Thomson, and former supervisor Frank Fenton, for their foresight. He also credited the former owner's family heirs, who shared the desire to preserve the property as open space and angling access.

The money the ceremonial check represented can be applied by the township not only to the initial property purchase, but also to other potential stream-related acquisitions, Sam said.

Where would the rest of the site acquisition money come from? The North East Township Supervisors are seeking funding from several sources, Sam said. One source that came through generously was the Coastal Zone Management Program, administered in Pennsylvania by the PA Department of Environmental Protection. The money came from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management. The Coastal Zone Management Program had previously designated the mouth of Twentymile Creek as in need of public protection.

This artwork adorned the 1995 trout/salmon permit. The steelhead were painted by artist Terry Doughty. The Twentymile Creek Access lets anglers reach the best steelhead stream in eastern Erie County.



The natural setting will be maintained for hiking, picnicking, environmental education and, of course, fishing. The public will be invited to participate and help flesh out the concept.

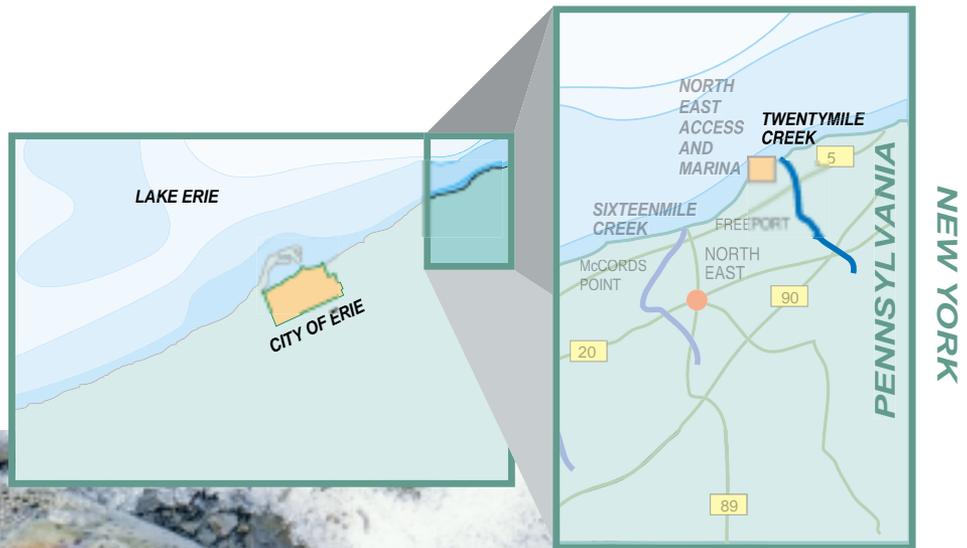


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The other major source of money for the initial Twentymile Creek acquisition was the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) Community Conservation Partnership Grant Program. With \$320,000 from DCNR and a matching amount from Coastal Zone Management, and with the contribution from the Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission's Lake Erie Fund, North East Township secured the deed to the Twentymile Creek site.

What's the next step? An angler parking lot was scheduled to be completed in time for the fall 2002 steelhead run. Sam has approached the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to draft a stream enhancement program for the creek, and the FishAmerica Foundation has been contacted for a grant for that work. As for what else will be on the property, Sam said the township envisions passive-recreational development.

"It won't be an amusement park," said Sam. "Everyone is concerned that all subsequent activities planned by the township will enhance the aesthetics of the whole site as they currently exist."

So the natural setting will be maintained for hiking, picnicking, environmental education and, of course, fishing. The public will be invited to participate and help flesh out the concept.

And what about the remaining \$168,000 in the Lake Erie fund?

"Now that news of the Twentymile Creek project is getting out," said Sam, "I expect that will bring out other requests for land acquisition and securing angler access. We have some things in the works already," he confided.

When they gel, you'll read their story here, too. ☐