



Two years ago, nearly a thousand people came to Cape Henlopen High School on a cold December night to protest a plan to build a bar/restaurant on the dune at Cape Henlopen State Park. At the end of that evening, DNREC officials declared that they had ‘paused’ the plan. Now, they're back with a new plan for a building on a dune.

Ten new capital projects are planned at Cape Henlopen State Park, but the Preserve Our Park Coalition is raising alarms about the plan to build a new two-story bathhouse on the dune north of the existing McBride Bathhouse.

We fully support the intent to rebuild the McBride Bathhouse at Cape Henlopen.

Few people would argue with the need; it is heavily used by visitors and shows the wear and tear of decades of use. In addition, it no longer meets the standards for public facilities, lacking ADA-compliant bathrooms and dressing rooms.

But, we are strongly opposed to tearing down the existing bathhouse and constructing a new building on an undisturbed area of the dune. There are already three dune crossings on this short stretch. Also of concern, we told by researchers, that a two-story building in that location would jeopardize the continuance of decades of data collection on migrating birds conducted at the nearby Hawkwatch.

With leadership from Preserve Our Parks (POP), Delaware Bond bill funding was secured in June 2024 to renovate the existing McBride Bathhouse, and this summer the Governor signed the 2024 Delaware Bond Bill allocating \$1 million dollars to DNREC’s budget for a "coastal region bathhouse renovation and dune crossing” at Cape Henlopen State Park. But, instead of presenting plans for a renovation, DE State Parks has proposed a new bathhouse with a new dune crossing from the parking lot to the beach.

The existing McBride Bathhouse occupies a large footprint. With some expansion of the footprint, coupled with an innovative design, a new bathhouse that is ADA compliant and serves additional needs for lifeguard facilities could be built without the environmental damage that would result from building in a new location.

DNREC officials says it is cheaper to build a new building than to renovate, but the environmental costs would be considerable. Their plan is to demolish the building, and then replace the damaged dune. A man-made dune is not a dune. It is a pile of sand--many years from functioning as a dune.

The instability of ‘restored dunes’ can be plainly seen at the north end of the Indian River Inlet where they have washed out multiple times since Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Dunes are stabilized by the deep roots of native beach grasses. It takes many years to establish this extensive root system during which time they are vulnerable to coastal storms.

Established dunes act as barriers to ocean storm surges and waves, and protect inland areas from flooding. DNREC is the state agency charged with protecting these resources. Why are citizens having to plead a case to protect them?

The Cape Henlopen State Park Master Plan, adopted in July 1999 said, "Create environmentally sensitive and sustainable park projects that preserve Cape Henlopen's unique and fragile ecosystem."

This clear guideline from the Master Plan should be the standard for all park projects under consideration. With uncommon wisdom and foresight, the Master Plan said,

"Cape Henlopen shall preserve the Cape's fragile ecosystem and honor its rich coastal history, while providing its visitors with environmentally sustainable recreation, interpretive, and cultural experiences."

To achieve this vision, it focused on these guidelines and development parameters:

- Identify and protect sensitive areas/determine carrying capacity
- Reduce the area of user impact
- Recycle existing buildings
- Locate new facilities in previously disturbed areas
- Eliminate unnecessary roads and trails
- Expand areas of native vegetation where appropriate

Take a walk over the dune from the beach parking lot at the northern dune crossing, where the bar/restaurant was proposed last year, and you will see one of the most spectacular views in the park. Then, look to your right and picture a large, two-story bathhouse. This view and this dune are irreplaceable.

Viewscapes are an under-appreciated treasure. All over Sussex County historic views across fields and farms are being lost to development. What we have at Cape Henlopen is rare--where the edge of the continent meets the vastness of the sea--the dynamic forces of wind and waves. Wildness is a rarity that must be protected.

Preserve Our Park Coalition asks that DNREC honor the CHSP Master Plan.

We Need You!

Stay with us in our efforts to Preserve our Park

Support the Park and Stay Vigilant.

Preserve Our Park continues its work to protect and preserve Cape Henlopen State Park

For more information visit preserveourpark.org