

2024 Update on the Shanes Creek Restoration Project

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Since the major portions of the [Shanes Creek Restoration Project were completed](#) in autumn 2023, the Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) and the Park Authority's (FCPA) staff and contractors monitored the site on multiple occasions. Overall, the work zone area (aka, Limit of Disturbance or LOD) is healing well. Native plants are growing but invasive species are ever-present. Assessments of water quality improvements will be determined over several years of testing. There are some concerns about encroachments and destructive actions neighbors took. The County staff ask for these findings to be conveyed to the public:

- In September, there was extensive weed whacking inflicted within the LOD, especially behind Windsor Hills Drive and extending towards Roberts Road on both sides of the creek. The perpetrator(s) left the planted tree saplings but mowed down just about everything else including plants germinating from the seed mixes and transplanted plants shrubs, grasses, and forbs. This whacking occurred nowhere near trails.
- So-called social trails were made that stomped through restoration planting zones. Figure 1 shows an example.
- Rocks were rearranged to form dams. Please keep the rocks in place and remember that there is a purpose to the stream design. In addition to monitoring the overall stream flow, there are several stations along Shanes Creek where the water level and quality are routinely measured.



Figure 1. An unauthorized trail at left was trampled through the recovering LOD. Though the official trail is near, this social trail loops between Shanes Creek (seen at right) and a flood control wetland (far left outside of view); see Figure 2 for the exact location. The pink ribbons mark the potted restoration plants that were added and found alive during a recent County survey; none survived on the illegal path.

To the first two points, the County paid for these plants, which came with a limited warranty. However, these outside factors that impact plant survival void that warranty and slow the LOD's recovery. Seeing people wanting to enjoy nature is great but kindly do so by staying on the trails and obeying [park rules](#), which state to leave animals, plants, and minerals alone without prior FCPA permission. When visiting a park, [leave no trace](#) of your presence.

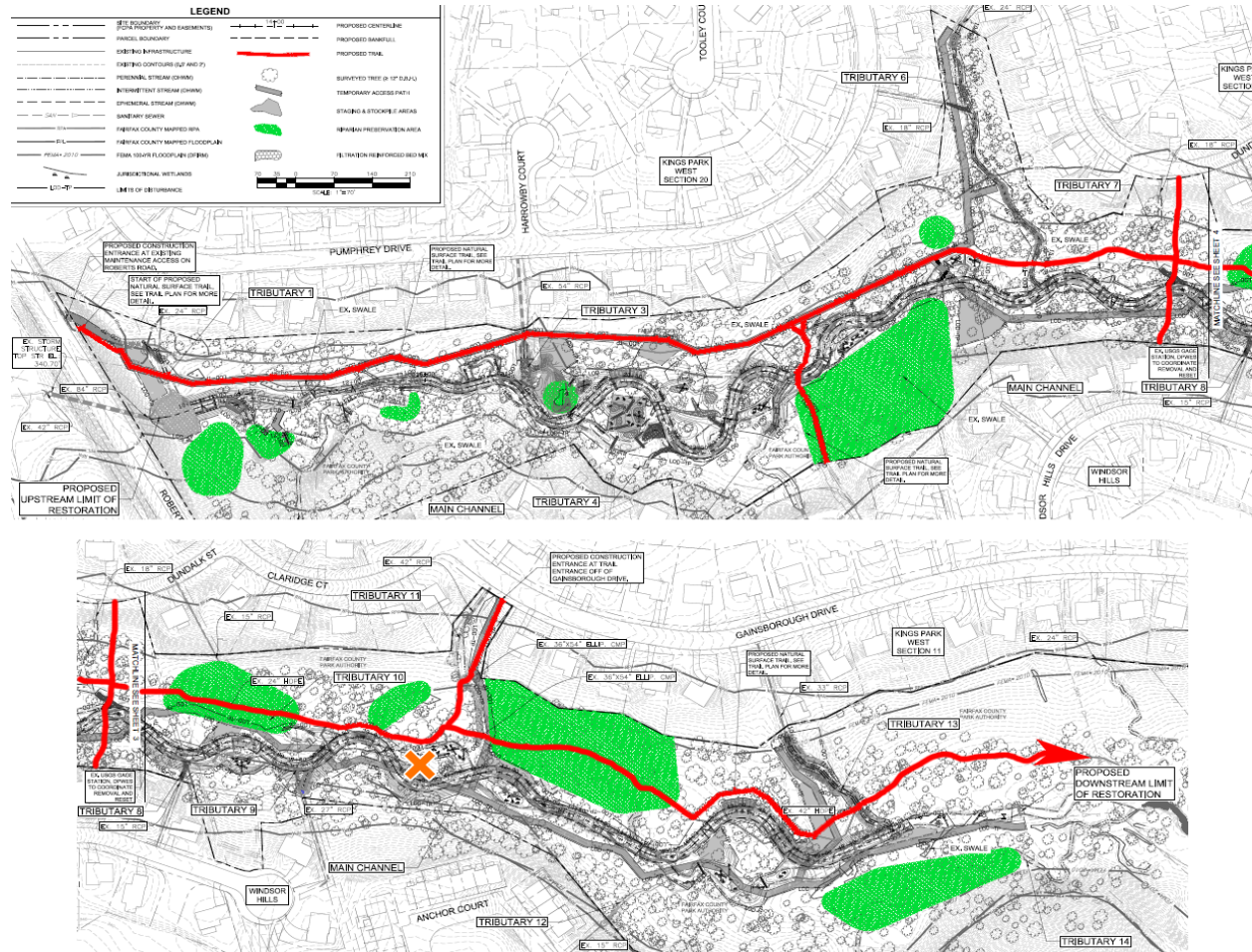


Figure 2. This map, split with a slight overlap, is from the DPWES “Pohick Creek Watershed, Rabbit Branch at Collingham Dr. Final Design Plan, Stream Restoration Project” (this waterway was [officially renamed “Shanes Creek”](#) into the planning process). Highlighted in red is the parkland trail (the line is wider than scale for easy viewing). It runs parallel to Shanes Creek from Roberts Road to the end of the project (arrow points towards the path’s continuation to Royal Lake). Since the trail is in the final blueprints, it should have been physically integrated with the rest of the work. There is current discussion on redirecting wetter portions of the trail. The orange X is where Figure 1 was photographed.

An incredibly sore point within the community is the shoddy condition of the trail that runs from Roberts Road to the Royal Lake trail loop (Figure 2). DPWES and FCPA are aware of the following points:

- So much of the trail remaining in disrepair is a PR disaster for the County and this project.
- If the official trail was more clearly defined after construction, there would be less confusion or no excuse as to where visitors should walk and not stray into restoration areas.
- Having stone sills that look like sidewalks yet are where people should not walk was bad planning.
- Regardless of how good or effective the restoration is, much of the public only really cares about the trail, i.e., people would be happier to have a great trail run through a woodland choked with invasive Bradford pears and contaminated streams than a poor trail amid a forest filled with native biodiversity and excellent water quality.

- Some of the project's most vocal critics engage in landscaping practices that necessitated this project in the first place, like piping roof runoff directly to the street instead of allowing the water to filter into the ground.
- In spite of rules and laws, there are park visitors and neighbors with entitlement issues that result in encroachments. DPWES and the contractors first realized this fact by the repeated fence vandalism and trespassing into the LOD. The problem extends to self-proclaimed nature lovers who treat natural areas as resources to exploit.

Being a biologist with intense studies in other sciences, I volunteer as a site leader for FCPA's Invasive Management Area program. This work involves habitat restoration and healthy land stewardship in Royal Lake's watershed on FCPA's land. However, despite the multiple complaints conveyed to me about Shanes Creek's trail condition, I am not "the trail maintenance guy." For more information about FCPA trails, please visit <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/trails>.

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One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on the land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise. —Aldo Leopold