

# BAILIWICK NEWS

*Reporting and critical analysis of Centre County public affairs*

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## **READER EDITORIAL: An unflinching look at Penn State's ugly environmental leadership failures.**

By Andrew McKinnon

Penn State, a land grant university ostensibly dedicated to studying agricultural lands rather than destroying them, sold Toll Brothers 45 acres of farmland in December 2017 at the intersection of Whitehall Road and Blue Course Drive, for yet another luxury student housing complex.

Not only will the development destroy a huge expanse of farmland and one of the most beautiful views in the region, it may also threaten the drinking water supply for State College. There is overwhelming public opposition to developing this land. Unfortunately, Penn State has chosen to thumb its nose at the community; Toll Brothers will likely break ground on the project this spring.

### Prioritize Environmental Health

Protecting the natural environment of our region is becoming increasingly urgent, especially given the anticipated challenges of climate change. Penn State uses its power and influence to rob us and future generations of our rights to a clean and healthy environment. Climate change presents an invitation to change the relationship we have with our home, the Earth, from one of disregard, exploitation, and plunder to one of respect, preservation, and living lightly upon it, as these are the very qualities we will need to survive the accelerating effects of climate change in the coming decades.

Penn State is not the only large corporate player in the Centre Region threatening environmental health. Just recently the community began gearing up for an imminent battle to keep Nestle Corporation from exploiting our water for tremendous profit at minimal cost.

Sound familiar?

### Penn State: Full (Self) Service Provider

The unfolding tragedy of the Toll Brothers development shows that Penn State is out of step with the needs, desires, and rights of the community. The university has become a rogue actor in the Centre Region, seizing its position of dominance largely through its status as a “state related” school, which affords it the opportunity to play both sides of the public-private fence.

For instance, in the case of the Toll Brothers

development, Penn State bought 26 of the acres for \$99,000 and has now sold the entire 45-acre parcel for a whopping \$13.5 million.

Because it claims to be a public institution exempt from PA's Right to Know law, Penn State is not required to disclose the details of the transaction and it pays no taxes on this huge capital gain.

However, as a public institution, that is, an “instrumentality of the state,” the university would have to comply with PA's Environmental Rights Amendment (ERA), meaning it must act as a trustee of the land.

If confronted with this reality, Penn State might claim it is actually a private nonprofit corporation and therefore not bound by the ERA.

However, as a private entity it would then have to open its records about this and other real estate transactions and would owe millions of dollars in unpaid taxes. Among other benefits, the revenue that would derive from real estate taxes could help pay to mitigate environmental damage caused by development, such as an upgraded water treatment plant if the Toll Brothers project contaminates the State College water supply.

### Addressing Climate Change

Penn State is in a position of great power to address climate change. In fact, the university has a reputation as a leading climate research institution and is the home of renowned leaders in climate research including Richard Alley and Michael Mann. Yet, despite what “public Penn State” is doing to address climate change, here are some ways that “private Penn State” is acting like quite an irresponsible neighbor and global citizen:

### *Increasing Enrollment, Privatizing Student Housing*

Between 1980 and 2013, Penn State increased enrollment 37 percent while increasing on campus housing only 3 percent (*Voices of Central PA*, July 2015, “PSU Planning Another Boundary Violation”). This is why there seems to be a new “luxury student housing” complex being built on every other street corner surrounding the University Park campus.

Penn State has purposely externalized its responsibility to house and feed thousands of its students. The Centre Region can't sustainably support this relentlessly expanding human footprint without degrading farmland, risking water supplies, and raising rents for the rest of the community.

In addition, unsustainable growth and development steadily increases the amount of carbon and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere.

#### *No Fossil Fuel Divestment*

Penn State has made no gesture whatsoever toward eliminating its fossil fuel investments. Meanwhile, over 125 colleges and universities worldwide and about 40 in the United States have agreed to part with at least some of their fossil fuel holdings. Penn State likes to proclaim itself a leader in lots of categories, but it is falling far behind in one of the most important categories of all – leaving as much carbon in the ground as possible.

All academic institutions have the implicit mission of contributing to a brighter future by providing students with a high quality education. It is unconscionable to simultaneously destroy that future by funding those companies that are most responsible for taking carbon out of the ground and putting it into the atmosphere.

#### *No Fossil Fuel Phase-out Plan*

Penn State has no plan to replace its two natural gas power plants with renewable energy. At best, natural gas is a bridge fuel from more carbon intensive fuels like petroleum and coal to clean energy such as solar and wind. At worst, it may be just as dirty as other fossil fuels, largely because of the significant amount of methane, a potent greenhouse gas that is released in its production.

#### Conclusion

We cannot afford to allow Penn State and other large and powerful corporations to compromise our future here in Centre County. Residents have the right to a clean and healthy natural environment and must protect it from large corporate predators.

Herein lies the hope that our children and theirs will enjoy nature still – large open fields and forests, clean air and water, rich soils and beautiful views.

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