

Park and wrecked?

Crowd tells MDC not to
close reservoirs to public

By Ed Jacovino

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Public officials and area residents have vowed their support and urged leaders of the Metropolitan District Commission to keep the water and sewer agency's reservoirs open for recreational use.

"We'll promise to take care of the land if you promise to give us access to it," Scott Livingston, a member of the Connecticut Forest and Park Association and president of the East Hartford company Horst Engineering, said.

Livingston and others spoke Tuesday before MDC members at a public hearing in West Hartford. The commission called the hearing because it's considering closing its land to the public after a Superior Court jury two months ago awarded \$2.9 million to a bicyclist who was seriously injured at the popular West Hartford reservoir off Farmington Avenue. The woman ran into a gate that keeps vehicles off the walking/biking trail.

Runners, hikers, cyclists, and walkers from

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Cyclists biked to West Hartford Town Hall for a public hearing before the Metropolitan District Commission to show their support for keeping the MDC's reservoirs open for public use.

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Commission appealing \$2.9 million judgment

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around the Hartford area flocked to the hearing. Many biked there. Others met at the reservoirs and drove in together. About 700 people turned out.

They argued against closing the reservoir land to recreation, supported the passage of a state law that could grant the MDC and similar groups immunity from certain lawsuits, and warned that the MDC could be setting precedent for other landowners to close their properties.

"It would be of great concern and great loss to many if the MDC were to close its facilities to recreational activities," Charlie Beristain, a founder of the group Save the MDC Trails, said. He asked commission members to keep the reservoirs open until the legislature has a chance to act on the issue.

The next regular legislative session begins in January, although a special session is likely to be called soon to consider campaign finance issues.

It's unclear how the MDC will act moving forward. MDC member

Timothy Curtis of Windsor said the commission will consider the issue and give ample notice if it decides to take up the matter before the legislature has a chance to act. The MDC is, meanwhile, appealing the \$2.9 million judgment.

Whose land is it?

Garth Adams, athletic director at the Kingswood-Oxford School in West Hartford, celebrated the reservoirs as the perfect place for students to train and compete.

"From our perspective, it's more than just a series of trails," he said. "It's part of the fabric of who we are."

And Art Roti of the Connecticut chapter of the New England Mountain Bike Association warned that closing the reservoirs could set off a chain reaction among other landowners.

"We realize the far-reaching consequences that this could potentially have," he said.

Public officials also vowed their support for keeping the reservoirs open.

Rep. David A. Baram, D-Windsor, told listeners he'll intro-

duce the bill in the House that would grant the MDC immunity from similar lawsuits. "Keep the reservoir open until the legislature has an opportunity to handle this issue," he said.

Rep. Andrew M. Fleischmann, D-West Hartford, questioned the MDC's motives in considering closing the reservoirs to public use. Towns and other groups aren't doing the same, he said.

"You — the MDC — exist because the people gave you your land and your waters," he said. "It is your responsibility to keep these lands open."

And Attorney General Richard Blumenthal offered his help to get the bill passed as well. "It should be your land, despite the legal difficulties that may be raised," he told the crowd.

Mary Glassman, Simsbury's first selectwoman and a Democrat running for lieutenant governor, was part of a group of cyclists who rode to the hearing from a meeting point in West Hartford.

"The MDC West Hartford Reservoir has long served as a valuable place for public recreation,"

she said, "providing a setting where bikers, hikers, and runners can share the outdoors and engage in just the type of activities that we are trying to promote."

The MDC oversees the more than 31,000 acres and is the state's second largest landowner. The reservoirs that stretch from Farmington to Simsbury contain about 29 miles of trails, said Susan Negrelli, assistant manager of water treatment for the MDC.

The commission's member towns include Windsor, East Hartford, Bloomfield, Hartford, Newington, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield. It also has special arrangements to supply treated water to Glastonbury, the southern portion of South Windsor, and the eastern portion of Farmington and East Granby.

Livingston warned MDC officials and state leaders that enthusiasts like him are by nature an energetic crowd that won't go away easily.

"We've got a lot of energy," he said. "If this issue doesn't get resolved, you're not going to be able to get rid of us."