

Conservation forum focuses on public lands

ENVIRONMENT » Congressman says Prince William refuge should be open to public now

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The Featherstone Wildlife Refuge should be open to the public, said Rep. Gerald E. "Gerry" Connolly, D-11th District.

The refuge, in Woodbridge, has been publicly owned, but without public access, for about 40 years.

"The refuge needs to be open to the public and, in my view, it needs to be open to the public now," Connolly said Monday at the Prince William Conservation Alliance's 2011 Conservation Forum, held at the McCoart Administration building.

Connolly was one of four

panelists to speak at the second annual forum, discussing this year "Public Access to Public Lands."

The other panelists were Rob Hartwell, chairman of the Elizabeth Hartwell Environmental Education Fund and commissioner for the Interstate Commission on the Potomac River Basin; Mike Kane, conservation officer for the Piedmont Environmental Council; and Charlie Grymes, chairman of the Prince William Conservation Alliance.

Much of the discussion at the forum centered on Featherstone, a 325-acre site along the Potomac River.

A draft conservation plan released by the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service earlier this year recommended opening the site to the public, if safe and legal access can be obtained.

Connolly and the other panelists at Monday's forum said they supported opening the refuge to the public, in part, because seeing nature makes people want to protect it.

"When you experience the beauty of public lands, you never forget it," Connolly said. "It almost becomes instinctual that you want to preserve it."

Grymes said opening the refuge and other similar public lands to the public would allow children like his grandson, who now plays only on "manicured HOA lawns" to experience nature.

"If we don't provide kids the chance to experience nature, they're going to think

everything is manicured and mowed," Grymes said. "They need to experience nature."

The speakers said they agreed that public access to the refuge should be done carefully to avoid disturbing wildlife there.

In addition to Featherstone, discussion at the forum also touched on Dove's Landing, a 225-acre property on the Occoquan River, which Prince William County has owned since 1996 but which has never been open to the public.

Kim Hosen, executive director of the Prince William Conservation Alliance, moderated the forum.

"This is a topic that's very important in Prince William County," she said. "There are now over 1,500 acres of public-owned land that is closed to the public."

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