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## Donation of land continues Atkins family's vision

By Mark Battista  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



The public will be able to access the new Atkins Acres Community Park off Courthouse Road.  
*Page Dowdy/Chesterfield Observer*

Anna Atkins wasn't a fan of the rampant development happening in her neighborhood. In life, she often talked about growing up in the hills of West Virginia and how important it is to preserve the natural landscape.

She continues that tradition – even in death. The estate of the late Paul and Anna Atkins has donated 113 acres to the county, most of which will be left natural. Thirty percent of the property will be used for new park facilities.

The land is hemmed in by Route 288 along the south, Richland Road along the east, Courthouse Road along the north and a subdivision on the west.

Anna's father worked for a timber company in West Virginia, and her family learned to live off the land. "She would talk about the sequence of picking berries. They would know when to harvest cranberries, dewberries, raspberries, huckleberries and blackberries," says John Coe, a family friend and will executor.

Anna's journal illuminates her family's kinship with the land. If the family needed soap, they would make it from rendered animal fat and wood ashes. They sewed their own clothes, foraged for wild edibles from the woods and raised livestock for food. One journal entry tells about serving young groundhog for dinner. Anna wrote that it tasted like lamb when served with butter.

Paul and Anna Atkins' life in West Virginia and their experiences farming land in Chesterfield County certainly shaped their ideas about land management and conservation. Though pursued by developers, the Atkins saw a different vision for their Courthouse Road property. They were hopeful the property would remain wooded and undeveloped "since they had it so long and worked so long to farm and raise cattle, pigs, chickens and things," recalls Coe.

"She would like to protect the water supply," adds Coe. "Her well dried up, and she blamed that on development around the property. She wanted to make sure the water stayed clean, and she would mention the [Chesapeake] Bay."

Anna understood how protecting her property benefitted nearby streams and the bay.

To make sure the land would not be developed, Anna worked with the Capital Region Land Conservancy and the Chesterfield Department of Parks and Recreation. Together, they crafted a document that conserves most of the property and opens up some land for recreational activities.

"Our mission is the conservation of the natural and historic land and water resources of Virginia's Capital Region for the benefit of current and future generations," says Jane Myers, CRLC's land conservation manager. The conservancy serves Richmond and seven surrounding counties.

During its first six years, CRLC has helped to protect more than 5,000 acres, including over two miles of the James River and 35 miles of streams in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Protecting the watershed is not the only reason CRLC is interested in the Atkins' property.

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Stuart Connock (foreground), chief of parks design and construction, shows a graphic of the proposed new park to Atkins family members, Vivian Gibson (from left), sister of Anna Atkins, Gibson's husband, Max, and Atkins' son-in-law, Bill.  
*Page Dowdy/Chesterfield Observer*

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"We are very dedicated to the idea of public benefit," says Myers. "[The Atkins' property] has the additional public benefit of being an open space that's going to be available for people to come and enjoy."

Most lands protected through the CRLC and similar organizations provide protection of the land, but rarely grant access to the public. This property will be the exception to the rule.

The parks department will manage the property.

"The facilities, except for trails, would be developed within less than 30 percent of the property," says Mike Golden, director of the parks department. "An easement conserves the remaining portion of the site. We do plan to put up some signage to tell the story of the property and the owners."

"This site will serve as a community park at some point several years into the future," adds Golden.

The park could provide open space, passive recreation, ball fields, courts, picnic sites, playground equipment, fitness trails and multipurpose trails.

Until it opens, the parks department will offer guided walks for the public starting this winter.

The Atkins' vision to conserve their land and provide recreational areas for kids will become a reality.

"[Anna] liked the fact that kids would be over there playing ball. She loved to see kids playing ball," reminisces Coe.

