

A Brief History of Shawnee Country - Medford, New Jersey

In the 1970's several pieces of legislation enabled the development of Shawnee Country. The NJ Condominium Act in 1970, and the NJ Planned Real Estate Development Full Disclosure Act in 1978, controlled planned communities with an open space component.

Almost at the same time, the U.S. Congress passed the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978, which was followed the next year by New Jersey's passage of the Pinelands Protection Act. These two pieces of legislation established the first National Reserve in the country.

The Pinelands Preservation Act (PPA) designated 1.1 million acres of land for protection from rampant development, therefore ensuring the quality of 17 trillion gallons of pristine water contained in the Kirkwood-Cohansey aquifer. This aquifer runs beneath Shawnee Country and is the source of our water supply.

For this preservation plan to be implemented, the PPA required a Pinelands Comprehensive Management Plan (PCMP) be developed. This was accomplished over two years with multiple public hearings. When the PCMP was released Medford Township (and Shawnee Country) were designated to be in the Reserve areas of the Pinelands, thus requiring the ecological preservation of the area.

Shawnee Country, a NJ Corporation, originally purchased the 157.89 acres of land from Corlen Engineering, located in Cherry Hill, for \$731,300.00. Settlement is dated 1/21/1975.

Construction began shortly thereafter with five model houses located on White Eagle Court. Number 2 served as the sales office. These, plus several other models, were available. The models were called Holly, Maple, Fern, Laurel, Elm, Spruce, Ash and Willow. It was also possible to provide one's own plans and the builder would then add these to the models he offered. The houses ranged in price from \$50,990.00 to \$65,990.00.

The first house purchased was 9 Silver Cloud Circle in March of 1975, for \$48,150.00. The annual real estate taxes were \$1,355.76.

In the beginning of the project, Shawnee Pass was paved between Tabernacle Road and Summit Pass/Thunderhead Drive. The construction trailer was situated along Shawnee Pass at Warrior Way, moved to Summit Pass, and then farther down as construction progressed. By 1980 Shawnee Pass was paved to Dixontown Road.

The builder, Dennis Foss, and the sales agents, Craig Fassler and Errol Bond resided on Lightning Drive and Shining Star Court, respectively. The construction manager, Peter Genzano, lived on Warrior Way.

The last house sold by Shawnee Country was 6 White Eagle Court in July of 1979, for \$84,990.00. By then the builder was in default of his mortgage, so First Pennsylvania Bank took possession of the lot at 59 Valley Run. That property sold at Sherriff's sale for \$887.32. Three years later a different builder finished this last house.

Over the years two easements included in the original purchase of the land were exercised. One provides access to 100 Shawnee Pass, where Fire Warden Tom Gerber built a home. The other provided for what is now Shawnee Reserve.

The second easement, which allows access to Shawnee Court, was exercised around 1990. Prior to that, the Shawnee Country Open Space Association (SCOSA) Board was notified by the township Zoning Board that they had the option to purchase the easement. However, that would have required a \$1,000 assessment to each Shawnee Country home. The SCOSA Board at that time opted not to respond to the Zoning Board. Thus, the opportunity to maintain that open space was lost and the easement went to the builders of Shawnee Reserve.

The place we call home, where we wave to passing cars and enjoy the peace and quiet of nature is not just a place to live. It is a legally binding arrangement governed by the laws of the State of New Jersey and the Shawnee Country Declaration of Covenants, Restrictions, Easements, Charges and Liens document recorded by the builder on March 19, 1976. It spells out each homeowner's responsibility to protect the common property that we own collectively. It is part of your Deed and runs with it in perpetuity.

The SCOSA Covenants spell out what amenities and changes to the houses are allowed, and how the open space should be protected. The purpose of the Covenants is, "...to provide for the preservation of the values and amenities in said community and for the maintenance of said common lands and facilities...".

According to the Covenants, when construction began the developer owned all rights to the common property. As each house was completed and sold the developer relinquished a portion of his share of voting rights and control.

The Covenants also created "...an agency to which will be delegated and assigned the powers of maintaining and administering the community facilities, administering, and

enforcing the Covenants and Restrictions, and levying, collecting, and disbursing the assessments and charges.”.

In 1982 when all 104 properties had been sold and settled, full control of the Shawnee Country Open Space Association passed from the developer to the homeowners, allowing for one voting interest per dwelling. It was at that point that members voted to create the “agency” as the non-profit, Shawnee Country Open Space Association, Inc.. This new entity then created bylaws that allowed it to determine the number and composition of the Board of Directors, election of officers, establish meeting schedules, determine the annual assessment and how the open space should be maintained. In short, control of the common areas went into the hands of the homeowners as members of the Association as specified in the original Covenants document.

SCOSA collectively owns 87 acres of open space. This includes the lakes (actually retention basins), cul-de-sac keyholes, buffer land between each home and alongside the roads, and the roads (which were subsequently dedicated to the Township). The Board of Directors holds monthly meetings, including one annual meeting for budget approval and election of officers. Meetings are open to all members of the Association.

The first annual dues assessment was \$60.00. Over the years the Board has approved funding to insure the open spaces, replace and maintain the beach sand, install an aerator in the swimming lake, maintain the lake dams, procure road signs, erect playground equipment, install a light at the swimming lake, and fund family events. The SCOSA Board consists of residents who volunteer their time to serve the community.

As for living in the country, here are some examples of what it was like in the beginning;

There was one traffic light in town at the intersection of Union and Main Street, and the intersection of Rt. 70 and Main Street was a traffic circle.

- Restaurants included Lucky 7 (an ice cream place/restaurant where CVS is now), Settler’s Inn (where PJ Whelan’s is now), Beau Rivage in Taunton Lakes (upscale black-tie service), The Indian Chief on Rt 70, Harry’s (now Ott’s), and Braddock’s Tavern which was half the size it is now
- Riviera and Branco’s were the only pizzerias in town
- McDonald’s (opened in 1983) is where a huge tree and a schoolhouse were once located

- Downtown had a men's store and later a children's clothing outlet
- Casaboom's Meat Market was located where LaFemmina is now
- Murphy's Market was called Stewarts
- The Acme was where Kennedy Fitness is (it was the only building there and about the size of the current Murphy's)
- The police department was housed in the old railroad station on Main Street (now a doctor's office)
- The US Post Office was next to the railroad station
- There were 3 actual bakeries
- Ironstone Village wasn't built
- The only pharmacy was Nugent's (where Republic Bank is now)
- GE was RCA

Shawnee Country school children attended Allen Elementary, Medford Memorial Middle (before it connected to Haines Elementary), and Shawnee High School (there was neither a school bus nor a girls' soccer team). In the early 1980's new high schoolers were bused to Lenape due to overcrowding at Shawnee. And kids sledged down the "hill" onto the lake, played jail break on summer evenings, canoed on the lake, rode their bikes everywhere, and listened for news of snow days on KYW radio.

Two Linda Elliot's lived in Shawnee Country at the same time and there was a volleyball 'court' along Shawnee Pass by the fishing lake. Shawnee Pass did not have yellow lines or streetlights.

SCOSA also has a social component that has been active over the years organizing and implementing;

- Easter egg hunts
- Fishing derbies
- Christmas parties at Little Mill Country Club (with a famous Medford DJ!)
- Progressive dinners
- Bon fires at the lake
- Annual clean-up days
- Holiday decorating contests
- A softball team, sponsored by Couch Potatoes (the local video rental shop)
- A town watch (this lasted about 2 years. There was no crime)

Lady slippers once grew along the Shawnee Pass, brown bats flew overhead in the evening and hop toads were plentiful.

Written by Judith Bennis with many thanks to Maureen Heaton and Jill Bennis for editorial assistance, Gerrie and Warren McMichael and Donna Bennis for research assistance, and Alex and Eli Green for technical support.

Photos by Dave Bennis