

The Deal with Deer: An Update



If you are reading this, you probably have experienced a near-miss crash with a deer.

And if you haven't experienced it yourself, you almost certainly know someone who has crashed into a deer with their car or had their garden decimated by deer or perhaps even been bitten by a deer tick.

In 2020, the Town mailed a questionnaire to all residents in an edition of the Town Crier seeking input regarding deer and surrounding issues. Among the 700-plus responses, 80 percent of respondents indicated a strong interest in the Town doing a controlled archery hunt as well as passing a "do not feed" ordinance.

As a first step, Town Council approved Ordinance No. 1513 in March 2021, stating "No person shall knowingly, purposefully, or intentionally feed deer, cause deer to be fed, or provide food to deer on any public or private property."

Later in 2021, the Town entered into an agreement with Suburban Whitetail Management (SWM) to run a controlled archery hunt to strategically lower the population of deer. This program entails property owners signing up for their land to be used for archery hunting and credentialled hunters signing up to hunt. Additionally, Town-owned properties were opened to SWM hunters. Participating archers (who are licensed and have passed a proficiency test) hunt on property specifically assigned to them only during the state's archery season. The hunters are required to clean up after themselves, maintain a log, harvest a doe before harvesting a buck, and donate their first and every third deer they harvest to a food bank.

The first year, hunters harvested 19 deer. The next year, it was 64 and the year after that, 65. In the 2024-2025 season, hunters got 50 deer.

While a major purpose of the SWM program is to increase safety and cut down on nuisance to residents, it also is meant to help the deer be able to survive more sustainably. A major issue with deer overpopulation is that the deer will eat almost any low-to-the-ground plant available to them. This means that residents' gardens and ornamentals, as well as natural undergrowth, have been heavily damaged and have been unable to regenerate.

Lifelong resident Ken Allshouse, a forest scientist and member of the Town's Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC), said he has seen the population of deer increase greatly over the years. Blackberry bushes and vegetable gardens used to be able to thrive out in the open. At one point, Allshouse fenced a portion of his property to plant young trees and flowers. Native plants outside the fence were consumed by deer while the protected plants remained. Eventually, desperate deer broke through the fence.

"I have given up my vegetable garden. Deer are hungry, consuming 8 to 10 pounds of browse every day," Allshouse said.

As native plants and gardens are consumed by the deer and native trees die, what remains are invasive species such as Japanese barberry, Japanese stiltgrass, and the toxic native plant snakeroot. Allshouse also has noted a concurrent decrease in the squirrel population and a change in the species of birds commonly seen.

"The overpopulation of deer has devastated our natural ecosystem," Allshouse said.

Although the archery program has cut down on the deer population a little, Allshouse noted that about three times as many deer are killed in McCandless by vehicles. The most recent season, 50 deer were harvested by hunters. But 163 were killed by getting hit with a vehicle. With insurance payouts for deer crashes often being in the \$3,000 to \$4,500 range, this represents a financial burden on motorists and their insurance providers.

Additionally, deer ticks greatly assist in spreading Lyme disease, putting PA residents at a high risk. Pennsylvania accounts for more than 20 percent of the Lyme cases nationwide (and seven of its counties are in the top 10 nationwide with the highest incidence of Lyme disease). Lyme disease is particularly tricky because, according to CDC estimates, up to 20 percent of people who contract it continue to have symptoms even after treatment.

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Jeff Petro, chairman of the Town's EAC, said that the committee has been tracking the deer statistics over the past several years. Given the continuing and increasing problem, the committee has unanimously declared its support for the Town to take a stronger approach.

"As the EAC continues in its mission to foster rain gardens, enhance parks through trail building and our current ambitious project of tree restoration and preservation, the reduction and maintenance of the deer overpopulation is the essential foundation to which success will be achievable," Petro said.

Town Councilman Nick Giorgetti said that deer were the number one constituent complaint he heard when running for Town Council. Since coming on Council, he has come to see deer overpopulation as an "existential threat" to the community.

"They are annihilating our native plants and don't allow for the regeneration of forests, they cause car accidents, and make something as simple as home gardening and beautification impossible. It is our job as members of Council to respond to the concerns of our constituents and ensure resident safety, and I am glad that the EAC is supporting a more extensive approach to deer control," Giorgetti said.

17 acres of greenspace purchased

The Town of McCandless will be expanding greenspace for future park offerings by buying more than 17 acres of land. This is one of the largest acquisitions of Town-owned land since 1976, when the adjacent Potter Park property was donated.

On April 28, Town Council unanimously approved entering into a purchase agreement with Janet L. Maier for property located at 1201 Van Drive, located just west of Potter Park, for \$475,000.



"This acquisition of land is a vital investment in our community's future. This space will foster recreation and environmental stewardship, ensuring all residents have access to a safe, vibrant area for generations to come," said Town Council President Jason Singer.

With Potter Park being directly adjacent to this land, the new purchase will create a nearly 30-acre plot of contiguous green space.

A major priority for Town Council is expanding the access of park and recreation lands for residents, and this acquisition will be a key component. The purchase of this parcel comes as the Town is undergoing its Comprehensive Parks Plan to develop Master Site Plans for its current parks and green spaces, analyze existing and future connections, programs and initiatives.

The new land serves as a blank canvas for residents to determine what should be offered on it in the future. As a part of the current Comprehensive Parks Plan process, the Town and its consultant, Pashek+MTR, are seeking input from the public at upcoming public meetings and focus groups.

"We will listen to the community and see what the opportunities are as we move forward," said Heather Cuyler, recreation planner for Pashek+MTR.