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# NEWS

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## ESF Admires Their Spunk

May 16, 2003

By Cammi Clark Staff writer

When Tully third-graders heard the owner of Heiberg Memorial Forest might pave the trails, they got angry.

They wrote letters tinged with emotion to the president of the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry at Syracuse, which owns the forest.

"This is the worst idea I've ever heard," wrote Grace Brill, 9.

"If you want to be known as the person who destroyed Heiberg, then go ahead and destroy Heiberg," wrote Mary Burgett. "I think you should stop what you are doing and think about the animals that live in Heiberg Forest."

Cornelius "Neil" Murphy, SUNY ESF president, received 90 letters from Tully Elementary youngsters.

He lauded the youngsters, but said SUNY ESF has no plans to pave the trails.

The report stemmed from discussion over the years about decaying wood chips on the trails and compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act rules, he said.

So impressed was Murphy with the concerns of the youngsters that he invited them Thursday to tour the col lege. He told them in person that

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there are no paving plans.

"I'm reassuring them that's not happening," he said. "I actually cross-country ski on it, and that's the last thing I would want to have under my skis."

Kathy Roberts, a park worker at the forest, said the report was widespread in Tully.

"Once the third-graders found out they wanted to put a hard surface on the trail, they were upset," she said. "The trails are designed for foot traffic. Paving would open it up to a lot more traffic of various kinds and it would disrupt many of the habitat on the trails."

The pupils' letters asked questions such as: What about the salamanders? The endangered red trilliums? The mushrooms? The newts?

"If they pave, we won't be able to pick up salamanders," Alexis Drumm, 9, said in an interview this week.

Her classmate Casey Doody, 9, said, "We like walking the trails and seeing all the flowers and trees. Just leave the trails alone."

Murphy described the letter-writing as "a superb learning experience."

"But," he added, "we would never do anything to adversely affect the environment ... There's no plan to pave anything, and there never was."

The wood-chip decay, he added, is a problem because it leaves a spongy mass that is tough to walk on. Every two to four years, the trail has to be dug up by hand, which requires significant maintenance costs.

The trails also need to be made accessible to people who use wheelchairs and compliant with the disabilities act, he said.

In certain SUNY ESF college courses, students were looking at options, he said.

They came up with at least three, he said: stone dust, brick paving or a porous pavement. Students suggested the school do a test of each, using 50-foot strips.

"But we don't even have the financial resources to do the 50-foot tests strips," he said. "It was never an item that I approved in our budget."

Any improvements in trails, he said, are being deferred because of economic conditions.

The Tully youngsters were involved in Heiberg Forest even before writing the letters.

They planted 100 sugar maples and about a dozen plants and bushes last week.

And they raised money throughout the school year to purchase new picnic tables that will be unveiled next month, according to teacher Vickie Marchand.

Dick Schwab, director of forest properties, said next time the trail's brochure is revised, it will acknowledge the effort by the students.



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Among the most passionate letters to Murphy was the one by Brill, who asked the college president to worry about what would happen to the animals in the summer.

"Any animal who walks across it will burn its paws," she wrote. "When it rains, worms will crawl up and die looking for shelter and anyone who goes to Heiberg will be disgusted."

Murphy said he wanted to go out of his way to correct the pupils' perception.

"These are future students at ESF with this kind of passion," he said.

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