

# Bridget Wingert: Happy to Be Here -- A geologic wonder is in danger



The Devil's Tea Table, seen from the New Jersey hills.

BRIDGET WINGERT

Thu, Apr 01, 2021

Stephen Freeman lives at Bridge Four in Tinicum Township, one of the areas across the Delaware Canal accessed by a wooden bridge from River Road (Route 32).

The view from his island is New Jersey, an area called the Delaware River Scenic Highway (Route 29). From his house he can clearly see the Devil's Tea Table a high rock outcropping that appears flat like a table, a place of Lenni Lenape lore. It is a Natural Heritage Site. Recently, local residents got wind of a New Jersey Department of Transportation plan to make improvements to Route 29 between Stockton and Frenchtown and federal funding is available. Devil's Tea Table is part of a 3-mile stretch of the highway under consideration for rockfall mitigation. The stretch of Route 29 is one of 10 proposed rockfall mitigation sites.

The plan includes blasting rock formations, removing vegetation along the highway, part is for proposed application of draping material to hold rocks in place.

The issue has been slow to surface but now, residents of Kingwood Township, N.J., local governments and environmental organizations are asking for details. Kingwood Township is adjacent to the north of Stockton, N.J.

Last week, Freeman made a presentation to the Lower Delaware Wild and Scenic River Management Council, showing NJDOT's proposed plans – as much as he could find - and illustrating why rock fall mitigation is not needed. Freeman is a volunteer with the recently formed Devil's Tea Table Alliance, comprised of New Jersey and Pennsylvania residents. They organized in response to concerns about the anticipated rockfall mitigation near the historic rock formation.

He showed photos of rocks that had fallen from the sidewall -- most small and hitting the road in the gutters. He showed why people wonder if the highway really needs rock mitigation. And Route 29 between Stockton and Frenchtown has no truck traffic because it is designated as a Scenic Byway. NJDOT has told local residents that public hearings on the project are not required and the cost at this point is \$33 million, according to the latest NJTPA (TIP) report.

A major part of the problem is that the plans were made with no input from the public.

Richard Dodds, the deputy mayor of Kingwood, said he first heard from the DOT about its then-\$12.15 million rockfall plan four years ago.

“They came in, they said, ‘This is what we’re proposing to do. We want your input on, not any of the work, but what would be the detour roads of the town,’” Dodds said in an interview with NJ.com. “The back-and-forth, that’s been mainly us asking them for information and them providing us with as little as they can legally get away with.”

Dodds and members of the community saw possible issues with the plan. They formed the Devil's Tea Table Alliance as an advocacy group to give input to the planning.

This spring the group is pursuing ways to get attention, enlisting the help of the Lower Delaware River Wild and Scenic Council, which was to support the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System created by Congress in 1968. The council sent a letter this week to the Hunterdon County Board of Freeholders, “While the dollars assigned to the project and the necessity for the initiative can be debated, we will stay focused on our concerns about the irreversible environmental impacts the project can have on the river as well as to the homeowners in Kingwood Township, N.J., and Tinicum Township, Pa. Kingwood residents are very concerned about long-term effect rockblasting will have on their wells and septic systems. Tinicum residents are concerned their viewscape will be erased,” the letter said. Dodds, chair of the alliance, signed the letter.

The alliance is hoping that Hunterdon County will adopt a resolution opposing the rock mitigation project, at its April 6 meeting, as Warren County has already done. Delaware Water Gap, a stunning ancient geologic formation, is located in Warren County. Kingwood Township is expected to create a similar resolution related to the Devil's Tea Table at a meeting April 1.

Questions members of the alliance have asked NJDOT include:

- Have threatened and endangered species been considered?

- How many people have been harmed by rockfall?
- What visual impacts would this have on Route 29?
- Would cement applied to the Devil's Tea Table rock formation, be visible from the road?
- Is it necessary to stabilize a structure that has been there for tens of millions of years?

The most recent meeting with NJDOT was in August in Frenchtown.

The mission of the Devil's Tea Table Alliance is to inform communities about the project; encourage towns, townships and counties negatively impacted by the NJDOT plans to pass resolutions opposing the project, and request federal and local elected officials, community groups, Native American Tribal groups and the National Park Service to require a true environmental impact study and public hearings.