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DRAGON RUN ACCESS PLAN

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The Dragon Run--A Unique Place

The Dragon Run Stream is a forty-mile stream characterized by extensive non-tidal and tidal cypress swamp. The cypress stand here is the largest stand in the species' northernmost range. The Counties of Essex, King and Queen, Middlesex, and Gloucester border the swamp.

In 1974 the Smithsonian Institution reviewed and subsequently ranked 232 ecologically significant areas throughout the Chesapeake Bay region. The Dragon Run System was ranked second. Prior to and since that time, concern has been voiced regarding the protection of this valuable natural resource. Early efforts to offer protection came in 1970, and most recently again in 1985, to have the Dragon Run designated as a scenic river by the Virginia General Assembly.

The Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC) has a long history of conducting management efforts along the Dragon Run Stream. In 1984 the MPPDC sponsored a two-day symposium on the Dragon Run. The event led to the formation of the Dragon Run Steering Committee as a subcommittee of the MPPDC Board. In 1988 the Steering Committee, the MPPDC Board, and three of the four counties bordering the Dragon Run adopted the recommendations for the formation of the Dragon Run Conservation District. Wetlands protection and buffering by up to 150 feet were implemented in these counties three years prior to implementation of the state mandated Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act.

Yet, with the identification and recognition of the Dragon Run at the state and federal levels and the conservation management at the local level, the true realization of its unique character can be experienced only at an individual level. While in a canoe, along a bank, or through the woods, the Dragon Run and swamp convey solitude and wilderness. It is nature at its finest, pristine and challenging. The opportunities the Dragon affords in nature interpretation, fishing, and hunting are coupled with responsibilities in stewardship and management. In short, access within the Dragon Run ecosystem comes at a cost, either by exacting damage to the system or by expending resources to manage the access.

The Need for A Plan

In early 1987, the Dragon Run Steering Committee identified five issues that needed attention in managing the Dragon Run Watershed. They are as follow:

(1) Development Management

(2) Forestry Management

(3) Agricultural Management

(4) Recreational Access

(5) Wildlife Management

As mentioned earlier, the Dragon Run Conservation District began to address the needs in development management. This plan will address recreational access. Other issues will be explored in an upcoming watershed management planning process.

Several factors have led to the need for organized management planning. Historically, land ownership status along the Dragon vested the property owner as steward and caretaker. This system of management has been successful in the past; however, two factors may portend a change to the status quo. First, the agrarian based economy is declining in the Middle Peninsula. This follows the national trend of the decline of the family farm and the rise of corporate farming. This trend is accelerated as an older generation of farmers and landowners retire or pass on and estates are divided among the next generation. A second factor compounds the first. The Middle Peninsula region has experienced steady and sometimes explosive growth in population over the last two decades; the result of which is the subdivision and development of land. The initial demand for "prime" waterfront land focused mainly on the wide tidal bays, creeks, and rivers bordering the counties. However, the high demand and price of prime waterfront has led to investors or newcomers looking at other waterfront land such as the Dragon Run.

While new landowners may not necessarily be poor stewards of the Dragon Run resources, there are factors which may contribute to a lesser relationship to the land and waters. As land is subdivided, the sheer number of property owners multiplies, and owner responsibility becomes more parochial and narrowly focused

on individual interests. The tradition of landowner management of public access through granting permission may become more limited as more and more people control less and less land. There may in fact be a decrease in accessibility as privacy issues begin to dominate the concerns of landowners. This could have implications in restricting sportsman, educational, and recreational access to the Dragon Run.

Access is occurring either with landowner permission, without permission, or unofficially at highway rights-of-way along the bridge crossings. In addition to the problems mentioned above with the increasing number of landowners, those landowners who have normally given permission to the public to access the stream via their property may be less inclined to do so because of injury liability issues. While the Dragon is not a dangerous stretch of water, it does present normal hazards which may cause injury. The real or perceived liability by the landowner for such injuries may cause a hesitancy to allow the public access.

As more people move to the Middle Peninsula, more people become aware of the Dragon Run. With a greater number of people comes a greater variety of ideas about recreational use, some of which may ignore property rights. When property trespass occurs and trash or other evidence is left, the property owner may again become hesitant to allow future access, even if permission is asked.

The four bridge crossings of the main stem of the Dragon Run provide unofficial public access via the right-of-way owned by the State. These occur at Routes 602 and 603 in King and Queen/Middlesex, Route 604 in King and Queen/Essex, and Route 17 in Gloucester/Middlesex. With the exception of U.S. Route 17, the roadways are of local area use and not major thoroughfares.

Another reason for developing an access plan for the Dragon Run is based on the concept of local constituent planning in a proactive manner. The state, federal, and county governments may at some future time have an opportunity to acquire land along the Dragon Run. With an active access management plan developed by the present landowners, guidance can be given as to the site location, size, and use which would be appropriate for the Dragon Run.

Types of Uses

The types of recreational uses afforded by the Dragon Run are oriented exclusively toward the "outdoor" sports of hunting, fishing, canoeing, hiking, and conservation education. These activities are experienced with only the comforts of nature, that is without any extensive built facilities or structures. The wild and difficult nature of the Dragon Run area attracts only those hardy enough to be fulfilled by the challenge and rewarded by the beauty.

Hunting

The extensive swamplands surrounding the Dragon Run Stream and the agricultural and forestry land uses within the watershed provide for excellent habitat for all types of native wildlife, including numerous game species. Since the land surrounding the Dragon Run is privately owned, hunting access is obtained by owner permission. A common method of hunting management is for the owner to lease lands to a hunting club. The hunting club then becomes a responsible party to the landowner in controlling access and liability issues. Hunting clubs allow members access to the leased lands and expect responsible hunting practices from the members. This arrangement curtails unauthorized hunting on private lands while preserving the traditional use of the land for game management.

Fishing

The Dragon Run provides for excellent recreation in its fresh water and spawn fishery. Fishing access is available by canoe or boat at bridge crossings and with landowner permission. While quantitative numbers are not available, most fishing probably occurs along the bank at the bridge crossings.

Canoeing

A canoe trip down the Dragon is truly an adventure and requires both physical and mental readiness. A canoeist must be prepared for numerous obstructions in the stream, requiring portage or dragging of the canoe over logs or beaver dams. There are places, too, where the main channel is not obvious and a traveller must have skills in interpreting the stream flows. At times of low water, such as during a summer drought, a trip down the Dragon Run may be unadvisable.

While the Dragon Run is not particularly dangerous from an experienced canoeist's perspective, there are hazards to be recognized. The aforementioned obstructions and the physical ability to carry and drag a canoe are the most obvious hazards. During periods of high water, the stream can run swiftly; and, when obstructions are encountered, tipping is a possible hazard. The Dragon Run can also be quite deep in places where it does not appear to be. Perhaps the greatest hazard is being unprepared for the length of a canoe journey. Because of its sinuous path, the Dragon Run is longer between two points than it may appear. What appears to be four to five miles may in fact be double that distance. When coupled with the time delays of obstructions, many a miscalculating canoeist has unintentionally spent the night in the swamp, encountering cold, hunger, and insects!

A first time canoe trip on the Dragon should be in the company of someone familiar with the stream and its hazards. At a minimum, a novice on the Dragon should consult maps and the advice of someone experienced in paddling the stream.

Canoe launching occurs at undeveloped sites at bridge crossings and at private landings with landowner permission. Problems at these sites include lack of safe parking and unloading areas, steep grades to the stream, vegetation and bank disturbance, and trespass on private property.

Hiking and Camping

The extensive swamp of the Dragon Run makes the area difficult for hiking and camping recreation. Often the stream is not visible from high ground due to the densely wooded swamp which borders it. Since there are no public trails, hiking is probably limited to landowner access to old logging roads.

As mentioned earlier, canoeing the Dragon Run takes adequate planning. Some experienced enthusiasts plan overnight trips, with a component to set up a primitive camp along high ground adjacent to the stream. Persons planning an overnight trip generally have (or should have) extensive experience on the Dragon Run and will receive landowner permission to camp on private property.

Conservation Education

Any recreational activity on the Dragon Run includes the enjoyment of nature at its best. The abundance of animal and plant life in the context of solitude provides a rewarding experience for the hunter and environmentalist alike. Several groups provide organized outings to highlight the uniqueness of the Dragon Run, both as its own ecosystem and as a part of the larger Chesapeake Bay system. The Rappahannock Community College includes several canoe trips as part of its curriculum for students and the community. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, Inc., runs educational canoe trips from time to time. The conservation group Friends of the Dragon Run organize membership canoe trips and stream cleanup days throughout the year. In the recent past, a commercial venture offered canoe tours of the Dragon Run.

The Dragon Run provides a natural classroom for students, scouts, and the public in general. Education about the ecosystem can lead to effective management practices for the Dragon Run.

Present Access Sites

Route 17

Located on the east side of north-bound U.S. 17 is an area with good access and unimproved parking. The land is posted, and landowner permission is required for use.

New Dragon Bridge--Route 603

There is an informal parking area on the Middlesex side of the bridge with a pathway to the stream. The extent of right-of-way and private ownership needs determination.

Wares Bridge--Route 602

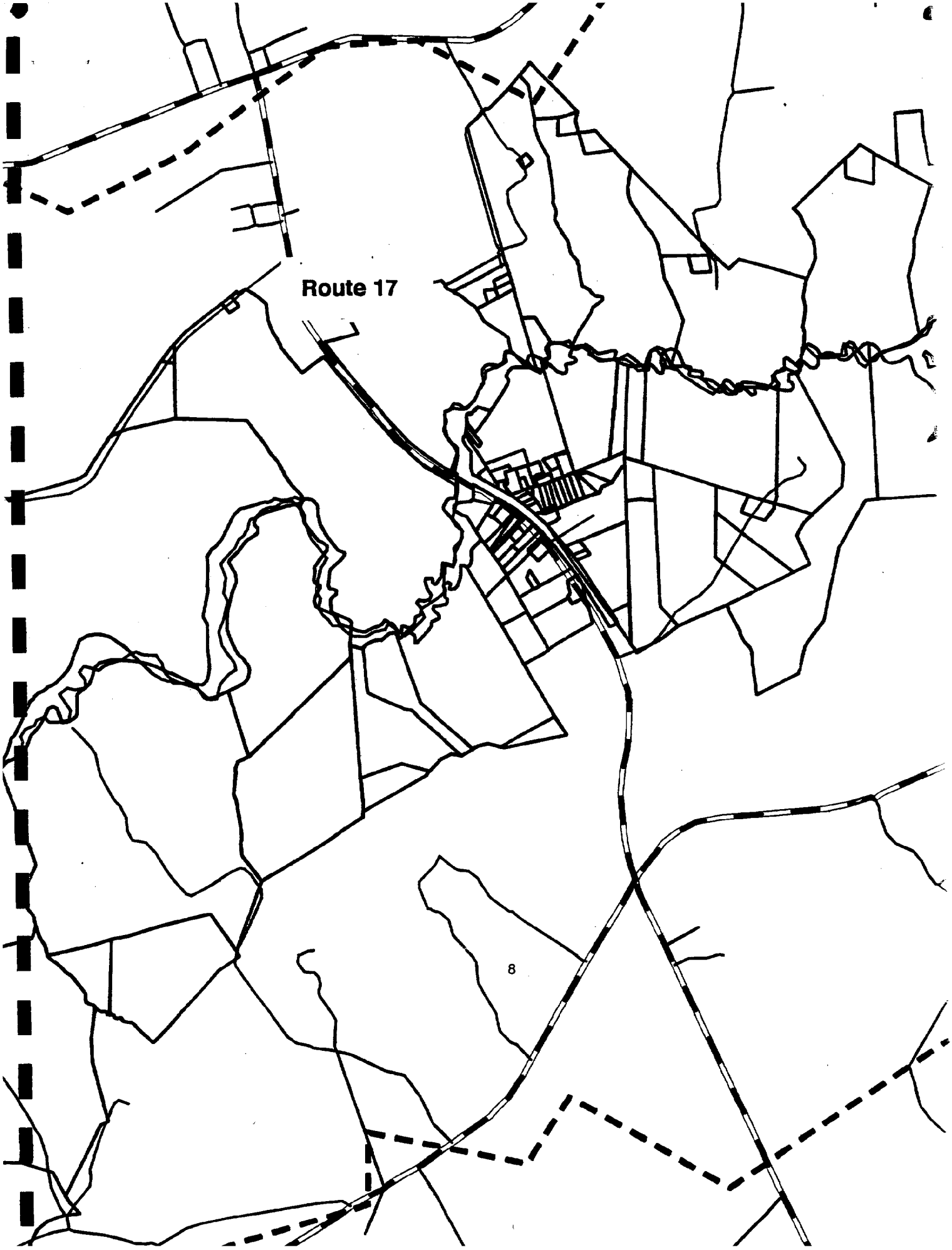
Right-of-way parking and access to the Dragon Run exist on the north side (Middlesex).

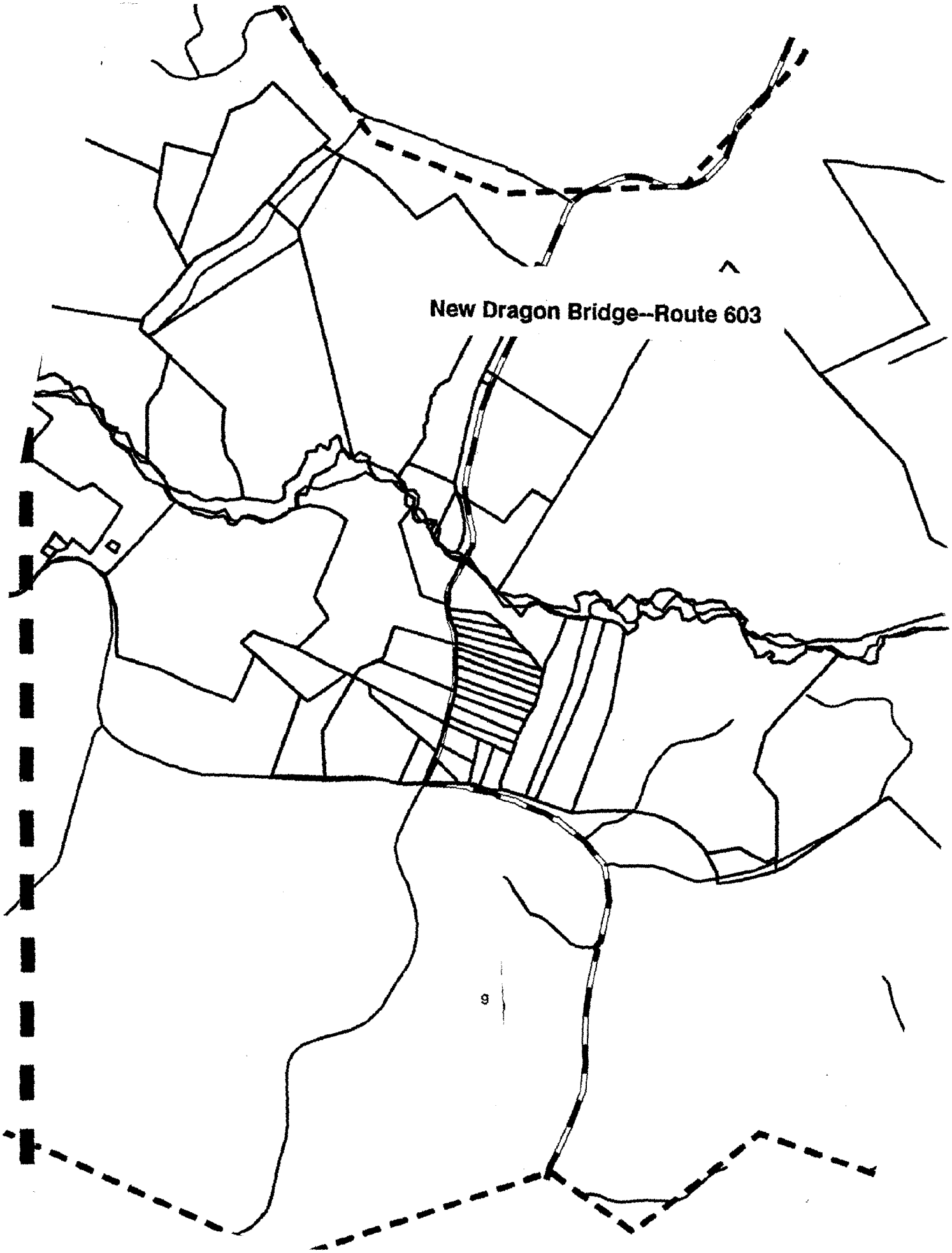
Byrds Bridge--Route 604

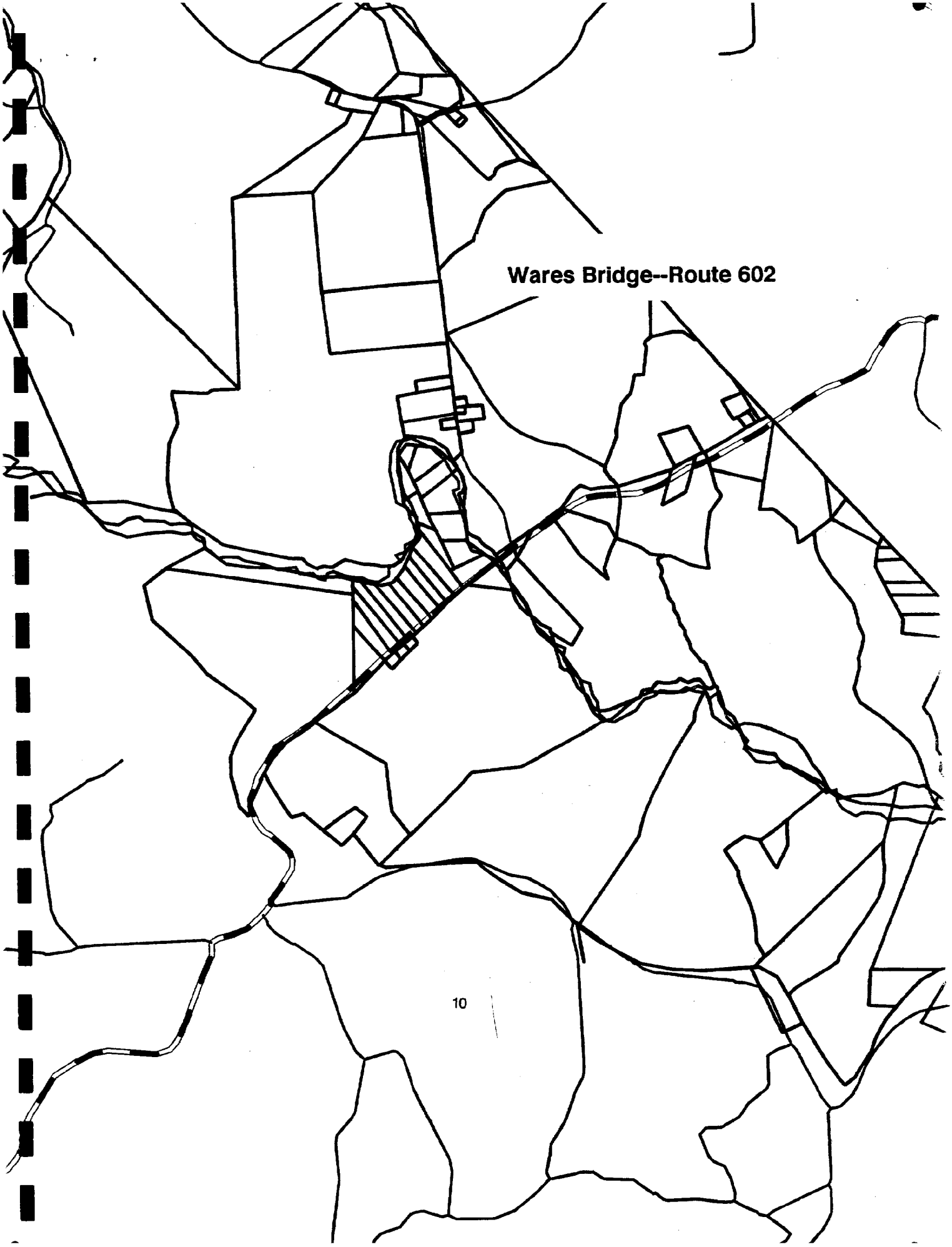
Remnants of the old road and bridge alignment can be seen; however, the land is posted, and parking is limited.

Upper Reaches Crossings

Routes 607 and 612 each cross two branches of the Dragon Run. The stream is relatively small, and recreation possibilities are limited. Access and parking are not available except at the Route 612 crossing of the lower Dragon Swamp branch at the Essex-King and Queen line where parking is available for about two vehicles.


Route 17


New Dragon Bridge--Route 603


Wares Bridge--Route 602

Access Policies

The present status of recreational access and availability has been examined in preceding sections. The following policies have been developed to address the possibilities and needs for improved recreational access:

- The Dragon Run is a valuable natural resource in which access should be managed to prevent environmental damage.

- The access made available should maintain the character of the present recreation uses and the wild and difficult nature of the Dragon Run stream and wetlands.

- Recreational activities which take place primarily on land such as hunting, hiking, and camping should be landowner or leaseholder controlled.

- Stream-based recreation such as canoeing, fishing, and conservation education should be accessible on a scale compatible with the size and difficulty of the stream. Access points should encourage planned and responsible use.

- Access sites should be limited in size and designed to protect the stream, stream banks, and wetlands from erosion, litter, and surface runoff.

- The four counties bordering the Dragon Run, Gloucester, Essex, Middlesex, and King and Queen, should coordinate development and management of any public access sites on the Dragon Run. The Dragon Run Steering Committee and the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission can assist in the coordination effort.

Access Management

The management of access to the Dragon Run can occur through both private and public means. Private landowners can determine the types and quantity of access allowed on land under their control. Local governments, through their parks and recreation departments, can manage selected sites for controlled public access.

Private Management

The history of private landowner management of the Dragon Run is a story of success which involves three major players. These are the property owner; leaseholders (hunting or other special use); and private, non-profit organizations. There are examples of how these groups can work together toward the common goal of protecting the resource while allowing and sharing access. One case provides for a conservation easement on private land which will limit future development while preserving hunting access. Another example provides a non-profit group with access across private and leased land to the stream and to islands the group owns for conservation purposes. The cooperation among these various groups and individuals provides a basis to expand management options. Two management options follow:

Conservation Easements--Landowners can place a portion or all of their land in a permanent easement which will prevent built development of houses or other structures. In designing a conservation easement, the landowner can stipulate the types of uses which will be allowed. For example, forest management and hunting may be allowable uses. The land may be sold or subdivided; however, the provisions of the easement are carried to the new owner.

Group Alliances--As mentioned in examples above, landowners can grant extended permission to various non-profit groups for access to the Dragon Run Stream. Another possibility is for two types of groups to share a lease. For example, a hunting club and a birding club could share an annual lease on property

based on the time of year in which each group would use the area. A hunting club would be active primarily in the fall and winter of the year. Birding (watching) may be best in the spring, summer, and early fall of the year. This concept of shared use could apply to purchasing as well as leasing land.

Public Management

While at present the only public access points along the Dragon Run are road rights-of-way at bridges, this may not always be the case. A government agency (local, state, or federal) may plan to purchase lands for public access purposes. Land may also be donated to a government, and then the agency must decide what to do with and how to manage the land. Various funding programs become available from time to time which may provide monies for parks and recreation sites and facilities. In all of these cases, it is important to have a framework for public access planning and development. The following options are a guideline for public access management:

Site Size--Water access should be provided on a relatively small scale in relation to the stream width. For example, at bridge crossings where the channel of the stream is forty to fifty feet, bank fishing or canoeing should be limited to five to ten participants (3-5 parking spaces). Sufficient buffering of the stream from parking areas should also occur. Generally, 50 to 100 feet of vegetated buffer would be acceptable.

Site Location--The location of any public access site should be compatible with surrounding land uses. Sites used as canoe launches should be spaced in reasonable intervals along the stream such that the trip will not extend more than about six to eight hours. The uppermost canoeable stream segment begins in the vicinity of Wares Bridge, Route 602. The New Dragon Bridge, Route 603, is 5.0 stream miles below, and the Route 17 bridge is another 9.4 stream miles.

Site Management--There are seemingly conflicting goals of providing public access to the Dragon Run while at the same time limiting any detrimental effects of increased use of the resource. With this in mind, public access should occur only with certain expectations of public responsibility, including not exceeding the capacity of a site, not damaging structures or natural features, and removing any trash generated by the user.

Site management can include various levels of user accountability as demonstrated in the options below:

- Limit parking at the site and post "No Parking" signs on road sides. Site parking limited to daytime use only.

- Parking permits for parking at an access site. These could be available from an on-site box or from the county parks and recreation office.

- Reservations system could provide controlled access at sites. Reservations could be obtained by phone or in person. Use information could be obtained and recorded by the locality.

- Electronic control devices such as arm gates with a strip card reader could be installed. Disposable cards could be issued by reservation or bought on site and would be magnetically encoded to activate a gate opening.

These options range from simple to "high tech" and may or may not be practical from a local management point of view. However, they represent options which can be adapted to a local management program. Enforcement could be accomplished by local sheriff's departments, state police, or game wardens.

User Contact--There is a benefit to having users of a public access site contact the managing department, especially when considering the wild and difficult nature of the Dragon Run. The local agency could advise users about hazards and conditions, provide maps, and help in trip planning.

User Fees--It is not unreasonable to charge users of an access site a fee to help maintain and manage the site. User fees could take the form of charges for parking, launching a canoe, or reservations. A user fee structure could include daily and annual rates.

Regional Coordination--It is possible that a system of access sites along the Dragon Run could involve up to four localities in site ownership and management. It is important that a standard management and fee structure (if applicable) be instituted by all of the localities involved. Providing a uniform system, which would be simple and effective for the user, would encourage responsible use and accountability for the Dragon Run. Design and maintenance of the sites could also be standardized among the participating localities.

Site Development

The following site criteria are adapted from the Chesapeake Bay Area Public Access Technical Assistance Report, October, 1990. These criteria pertain to the development of small public access sites suitable for canoe launch, fishing, and educational access.

- Location of parking and support facilities which are not water-dependent on higher ground outside the recommended shoreline buffer areas.
- Where steeper slopes exist, locate parking areas above the crests and maintain or reestablish the natural vegetation on the slopes.
- The scale, species, and spacing of plants should be compatible with those of surrounding shoreline areas.
- In grading of the site, the slope gradients and scale of mounds, swales, and berms should be appropriately designed where possible to create rounded earth forms compatible with those of the natural shoreline.
- Land area of 1.5-2.5 acres.
- Three to five 10' x 20' parking spaces, including one 12'6" x 20' handicapped parking space.
- Access road which meets secondary road standards.

- 100' buffer zone at the shoreline.

- Minimum water frontage required for a cartop boat/canoe launch is 50'.

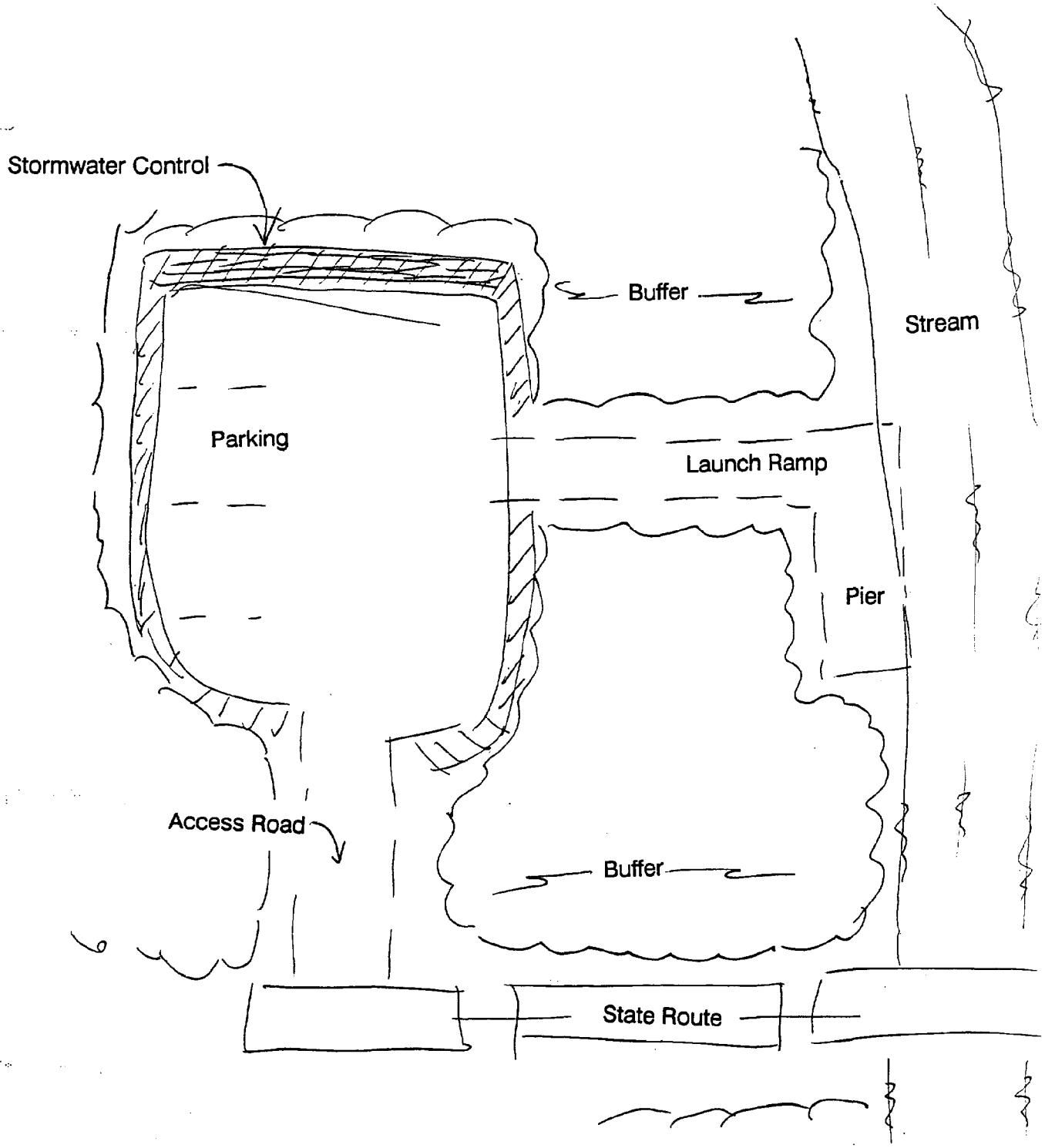
- Use of porous gravel and Best Management Practices in managing stormwater runoff.

- Carry down walkway and dock 48 to 60 inches wide, with maximum slope of 3:1.

- Dock to include fishing stations parallel to shoreline.

A concept plan depicting the general relationship of site elements is shown on the following page.

CONCEPT LAYOUT for CANOE and FISHING ACCESS



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