

**The Chronicle, April 21, 2020 (reprinted with permission)
Watershed group concerned sale might damage natural areas.
Worries a new owner could limit public access to lake and land.**

They don't take public stands on single issues.

But that doesn't mean the Octoraro Watershed Association isn't concerned about the prospect of a hostile takeover of the Chester Water Authority,

"We don't take a position on that," said OWA president Rupert Rossetti. "But we are concerned about the water quality and the natural resources."

The watershed association is a nonprofit formed more than half a century ago. It is one of the earliest groups to work on stream restoration and other projects to improve the quality of water in the creek and its tributaries.

The Octoraro Creek and its two branches were among the first waterways to be listed as a state scenic river. The creek, its branches, and its tributaries have also been the focus of water quality improvements that will, in turn, improve the health of the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay.

"We are concerned that the watershed and its natural resources would be under threat by any change in ownership," Rossetti said. "Over the years, we have worked well with the Chester Water Authority."

Among the concerns are the public's access to the reservoir, a popular fishing location, and the land the authority owns around the lake and the streams.

"They have over 2,000 acres that are contiguous to state game lands and 700 acres of property that's open to the public," Rossetti said. In recent years, much of that land has been open to hunting.

Some of that land is now zoned agricultural. The best way to assure it is preserved would be to have it placed in a conservation easement that would prohibit development.

For more than a year, the for-profit Essential Utilities, formerly Aqua America, has been trying to buy the Chester Water Authority. The authority has customers in Chester and Delaware counties, serving them from a treatment plant in Little Britain Township. That plant draws some of its raw water from the Octoraro Reservoir, a man-made lake formed by the east and west branches of the Octoraro Creek.

The city of Chester has considered selling the water authority. The money from that sale would help stabilize the city's finances. Chester Water Authority has offered to pay the city \$60 million in return for a promise not to sell the utility for 40 years.

"We're not about the rates [a water company charges its customers]," Rossetti said. "We're about what happens to the natural lands around the reservoir that are in a natural state and the quality of water in the watershed."