

CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA TORCH CLUB MINUTES (12 December 2012)

President Dean Snow called the meeting to order at 7 p.m. Roy Hammerstedt introduced his guest, John Wainwright, and Gordon DeJong introduced his wife, Caroline, and also reminded the members to use our new brochure as a means of recruiting new members.

Dean introduced the speaker, Gary Petersen, who has been teaching a three-credit on-line course, Soil Science 101, this fall for Penn State's World Campus. Using a computer to illustrate his instructional methods, he showed how on-line instruction enables him to introduce the principles of soil science to sixty geographically dispersed students of various ages and academic levels. Although he was initially skeptical about the efficacy of this new method, compared with conventional classroom instruction, Gary has found that on-line instruction can be used to impart information, illustrate the principles with still photos, videos, and maps, examine the students (five times during a fifteen-week course), and provide "labs" that provide hands-on experience with soil gathering, analysis, and testing. All the students may choose the times when they access the lectures and the reading assignments (which are on electronic reserve), perform the labs, and take the examinations. They may correspond with him and with their classmates and in fact have done so often. Many of the issues covered in Gary's course include erosion, the effects of "fracking" and of mining, the positioning of new buildings, precision application of fertilizer or pesticides, farmland preservation, water quality, food security, and even the misguided development of ethanol as a petroleum substitute. Some of the students are enrolled in resident instruction at Penn State, but most are taking this course through the world campus and live in 29 American states and two Canadian provinces. Students are required to make a land use plan for a 4,000-acre site, which may be anywhere in the world. Gary, a retired professor, has traveled widely and hence is familiar with many different states' and countries' soil conditions. Eleven questions were raised by other members: tuition fees for the course, how it compares with traditional correspondence courses, timing of tests and prevention of academic dishonesty, enrollment capacity, application of this instructional method to more advanced work in soil science and other disciplines, problems of using Angel as a course management system, future technological obsolescence, how student possession of laptops has increased flexibility, the effect of wireless connectivity on the quality of class discussions, and the possibility of getting away from the fifteen week semester.

Meeting ended at 8:05. Attendance: 21 members, 2 guests.

Respectfully submitted, Art Goldschmidt, Secretary