

IS IT A PARK OR A HEAP OF TROUBLE

By Peter Pae

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There is a mountain growing in Loudoun County.

It's only 70 feet tall, but when completed it could rise as high as 190 feet above the surrounding fields and forests, making it the highest point between the Blue Ridge Mountains and the hills of Northwest Washington.

And all of it is to be built of landfill.

In an ode of sorts to environmental consciousness, an unconventional millionaire is building the mountain on his 1,200-acre property near Dulles International Airport as part of a bigger attraction: an ecological theme park, to feature lakes and streams filled with indigenous fish, forests and wildlife, as well as nurseries planted with rare plants and herbs.

Paying visitors would come to tour the property and its ecological exhibits, plant trees, romp in an old barn and, of course, hike up the mountain, with its panoramic views of surrounding Northern Virginia.

"What I want to do is get people out here," said Peter Knop, the brains behind the project, as he stood atop his mountain-in-the-making. The mountain "makes them want to come. Now you've got an attraction."

Knop, who is listed as one of the 100 wealthiest people in Virginia, said he will develop the park with \$6 million to \$8 million of his own money, which he hopes to recover from admission fees and research grants once the mountain is completed.

But what Knop may see as a tourist attraction others view as a mere pile of dirt, if not an outright nuisance.

"I have to do a lot of explaining and give people a tour of the place," said Knop, 52, "before they comprehend what I'm trying to do."

And some still don't. County officials and some environmentalists who question his methods say that Knop's ecological park project is nothing more than an attempt to legitimize what is just another landfill operation.

Indeed, there are some similarities. One day last week, a line of dump trucks waited to unload excavated dirt from area construction sites onto the base of Knop's mountain. The owners had paid Knop \$10 to dump the dirt, a steep discount from the \$50 to \$80 they would have paid to unload it at the county-run landfill.

"A lot of what he's done is in the name of ecology," said a county official who wanted to remain anonymous because of the county's ongoing battle with Knop to stop some of his operations, such as a newspaper composting experiment at his farm. "But we're not sure of his claims."

Marian Czarnecki, a farmer and chairman of the county's agricultural advisory committee, said farmers have a begrudging respect for Knop. "I approve of what he's doing. He's just a little unorthodox. That's all."

A fiercely independent entrepreneur who is often referred to as the mad scientist of Northern Virginia, Knop has dabbled for years in what he calls "agricycling," a term he coined for turning leaves, grass clippings, tree limbs and even large stumps into mulch, soil additives and other products that will encourage the growth of trees and other plants.

Agricycling will be one of the highlights in Knop's new park, he said. The main attraction, however, will be the mountain, which Knop envisions with a lake at its top and several streams flowing through various gardens that will act as an outdoor laboratory of sorts for researchers.

Encompassing 14 acres, the mountain is expected to cost \$35 million to \$40 million to build. Most of the money will come from the fee Knop charges each dump truck that unloads debris onto his property. On average about 200 trucks ferry dirt to the mountain each day. To address concerns of contamination, Knop said, the source of the dirt is inspected and then his geologists check it again when it is dumped to make sure there are not harmful chemicals present.

This fall, Knop said, he will launch an international competition to choose a designer of the mountain. The competition will also be a way to promote his mountain.

"Some people have accused me of being an opportunist," said Knop, who makes money by collecting fees from people to dump yard debris on his land. He composts the waste into mulch, which he uses to fertilize trees that are sold to nurseries.

Knop said all his projects are meant to make money. "I say if you can't make it economically viable, then it's not worth it," he said. "It has to pay."

Knop, a son of a third-generation farmer, said he saw the "writing on the wall" 15 years ago and converted what had long been a dairy and crop farm into a nursery for Christmas trees and other plants that could be sold to nurseries. Known as Ticonderoga Farms, it is now one of the area's largest tree farms.

Then about four years ago, he began to experiment with composting and recycling yard and tree debris. That's when he conjured up the idea of creating an ecological research and education park.

He already has begun to open his farm to children on a limited basis. Children who pay a fee of \$3 to \$4.50 tour his farm on a hay wagon, ride a pony and plant a tree. They don't get to see the mountain or the nurseries, however.

Last week, a dozen tots from Springfield romped through a log cabin after a tour and pony ride. Based on their reactions, Knop may have something.

"It's awesome up here," 6-year-old Daniel said as he climbed up a ladder to the second-floor lookout in the log cabin.

"I like it here," said Aaron Myers, 6. More than Kings Dominion, the theme park? "Oh, yeah."

Knop said the "educational program" for the kids does not make money for him, because all of the fees are used to cover operating expenses. But being a shrewd businessman, he said, "I see them as future customers.