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## RSW Workforce crew enjoys getting outside and contributing back to the community

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RSW Workforce crew members bring and use a variety of tools and equipment as they clear brush and make new trails at the Rappahannock County Park. Here a crew member cuts the top off a stump making it safer for people to walk in the park and keep mowers from being damaged. Photo by Chuck Jackson/BRI.

**by** Chuck Jackson *Staff Journalist*

Serving time for driving a vehicle after being declared a habitual offender and possession of a controlled substance, New Market resident Greg Bell found himself with two years in jail.

He could have spent the time sitting in a general population pod at the Rappahannock-Shenandoah-Warren Regional Jail watching TV or playing cards, but he wanted to be outside enjoying the weather with a little hard labor thrown into the mix.



*Rappahannock-Shenandoah-Warren Regional Jail Workforce crew member Greg Bell (right) works with another crew member clearing brush last Friday, at the Rappahannock County Park. Photo by Chuck Jackson/BRI.*

Bell is one of a group of about 10 inmates at the Front Royal jail complex that makes up the RSW Workforce.

They're housed in a separate unit from the others and because they're willing to put their time to good use, get privileges inmates do not – they get to see the sunshine more than most locked up and get to show they're not a menace to society.

Bell got two years for his crimes and Friday, told a Blue Ridge Independent reporter he has one more to go. He'll spend some of it at the Rappahannock County Park, where the work crew has been felling trees and cutting them into five-foot lengths to be used as path guides for a trail leading down to the Rush River.

They'll also be clearing brush along the park boundary for more walking trails as the county's Recreation and Park Authority readies the park for another busy season.

Kids young and old with a few parents visited the park Friday oblivious to a handful of prisoners hard at work cutting brush, raking dried leaves and hauling it to a brand-new dump trailer the jail purchased primarily for use at Rapp's Park that's located on the

south side of U.S. Route 211/522 across from Warren Avenue, heading into the Town of Washington.

Lt. Zach Sloat and Officer Brandon Potter supervised the crew that also included Middletown resident David Dill, who has “one year and two months” left on a three-plus stint of incarceration for a variety of non-violent crimes.



*RSW Regional Jail officers Lt. Zach Sloat and Officer Brandon Potter supervise the Workforce crew at the park. Photo by Chuck Jackson/BRI.*

Dill, a concrete worker by trade, got arrested in Warren County and went to RSW awaiting trial. After his sentencing he went back to RSW and eventually got into the workforce program.



*Workforce crew member David Dill, a Middletown resident serving time for crimes in Warren County, rakes debris at the park. Photo by Chuck Jackson/BRI.*

“I get outside instead of staying inside and locked up,” Dill said. “We like having different work every day and making a difference, helping the communities.”

“We serve Rappahannock County but never have done any community work in Rappahannock County,” Lt. Sleat said. “When we got the opportunity, we jumped right into it.”

County Administrator Garrey W. Curry Jr. serves on the jail authority board along with Rappahannock County Sheriff Connie S. Compton. When Curry learned of the workforce group, he found out what was needed and made it happen.

The Rec Authority has grand plans to make the park more accessible for its citizens, including building handicap-accessible facilities and trails but lack the equipment and manpower to make it happen. The authority also doesn't have a lot of money in its coffer and doesn't get any money from taxpayers either.



*One of the many new trails under construction at the county park, thanks to major work provided by the RSW Workforce crew. Photo by Chuck Jackson/BRI.*

The major fundraiser for the authority is the Fodderstack 10K road race held every April and that funding is primarily used for mowing and cleaning of the park and repairing existing infrastructure.

Warrenton-based PATH Foundation has given the authority several grants with the potential for more in the future and now the park has new concrete cornhole equipment and is in the process of installing a small Disc golf course.

Authority members Torney Van Acker and Ruth Komanetsky Welch have spearheaded the workforce projects for the park.



*Park Authority board member Torney Van Acker has been working side-by-side with the Workforce crew at the park. Photo by Chuck Jackson/BRI.*

The crew currently has been working the park three days a week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, weather permitting. They arrive in two vehicles, a 15-passenger non-descript van that one wouldn't know was housing prisoners other than a bar light on its top and a pickup truck and trailer.

The trailer hauls all the equipment – chainsaws, wheelbarrows, and a sundry of hand tools the crew needs for their tasks. They also have a Gator when heavy-duty work is needed in the more remote areas of the park, including the steep slope leading down the river.

They arrive around 9 a.m. and leave around 3 to 3:30 p.m., giving the trailer time to head to the Amissville Dump where a large brush pile is currently being ground up into mulch. So far, 12 loads have been taken there and when they're ready, they'll bring new mulch back to the park to spread on the new trails being built.

The jail prepares bag lunches for the group when they're offsite of RSW and they receive no pay for the work they do.

But, according to Lt. Sloat, they do get additional time-off for good behavior and don't have to pay the \$2 per day housing fee that helps cover food and the daily operation costs of the jail.

Another perk they get according to Lt. Sloat: the jail buys Friday night dinner for the crew, which can be anything from burgers and fries from a fast-food restaurant or pizza.

"That always makes them happy," Officer Potter said.

Van Acker has been there every day the workforce has, and he says he plans to continue to do so.

He works side-by-side with the crew and Lt. Sloat and Officer Potter said they'd like to "get dirty" and work with them too, but their responsibility is to make sure the crew behaves themselves and more importantly, no one walks off.

"They each have an ankle bracelet that's monitored back at the jail," Lt. Sloat said. "We had one walk off last year, but he was assigned to Warren County Parks and the park was bonded so we didn't have any personnel on site. He walked. Obviously, we don't do that anymore."

Torney said he appreciates what Curry and the sheriff did to get the workforce working in the park.

"It's saving us a lot of money we don't have and allows us to use the money we do have for park equipment and repairs," Torney said while taking a breather while Dill and another prisoner continued working. "And since we don't have any equipment, we don't have to go borrow or rent it. It's a win-win for us and the county."

Torney said the crew will continue working until early to mid-April, wanting to avoid the arrival of Tick season. In the interim, he's hoping the crew can finish the boundary work and if some funding becomes available and a Virginia Department of Transportation Land-Use Permit comes through, he hopes the crew will be able to plant some small, native shrubs, bushes and flowers in front of the park along the highway.

"It would be nice to have a sound and headlight buffer from the traffic on the roads since we hope to soon have our Dark Skies certification for the park," Torney said.

If plans continue, the two correctional officers hope to spring a surprise on the Workforce Crew – have a picnic at the park on their last day this spring. "They'll love being able to relax under the shelter, fire up the charcoal grill and cook hamburgers and hot dogs. It'll be a good way saying a job well done."

The Workforce also helps maintain the mowing of medians on U.S. Route 522, in Warren County, mows and maintain the grounds of the regional jail and the regional police academy in Middletown, performs litter pickup along Interstate-81 and the primary roads in Warren County and works at the Shenandoah County Landfill.