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## Klein Fen Gets Friends (and Recharge Zone)

Hard work to save a rare fen has given birth to a new organization that intends to continue as its advocate. But protecting this wetland wasn't without hardship.

In September, the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County voted to invoke "eminent domain" on 100 acres of a 204-acre parcel of land that drains into a rare fen complex in the adjacent West Branch Forest Preserve. The acreage is owned by the Jemsek-Hinckley family, owners of St. Andrew's Golf and Country Club, and is located north of the golf course between Klein Road and Route 59. Currently, it is leased out for crops. On the other side of Klein Road, the 631-acre West Branch preserve is currently undergoing a multimillion-dollar restoration.

The Jemsek property serves as a water recharge zone for the preserve's roughly 25 acres of graminoid fens. The fens occur in nine scattered but connected areas sloping down toward the DuPage River, with a high-quality remnant "perched fen" at the top, the only one of its kind in the county.

A perched or "hanging" fen, says Scott Kobal, district plant ecologist, is "a little like a volcano," with water percolating out of it. For these fens to survive, water must flow continuously and slowly underground, through the fens, and eventually into the DuPage River. Currently, drain tiling uphill of the fens sends much of the water directly into the river. This has contributed to drying of the fens, encouraging invasive species that threaten the wetlands' rare plants.

When the Forest Preserve District approached the Jemsek-Hinckley family regarding purchase, the family went to the City of West Chicago, asking for the land to be annexed and rezoned under a master plan from the 1990s. The family said they had no plans to sell, however.

When the first meeting to address the issue was called in July 2007, area residents began investigating the property and learned about the fragile ecosystem it supported. Concerned that rezoning for residential use would inevitably lead to incompatible development, several of them formed a new group, [Friends of Klein Fen](#), to support the Forest Preserve District. "A team spent a lot of time educating neighbors and knocking on doors," says Cary Dittmann, one of the group's founders. "When people understood it, they supported it."

As West Chicago moved toward annexing the land, the district continued to negotiate. Their hands were tied, since they are only able to pay based on appraised value. Unable to reach an agreement after several rounds of price negotiations, the district filed papers in September for condemnation of the most crucial 100 acres. Condemnation, which appropriates private land for public benefit and pays landowners fair market value, is a long process and can take up to two years. Conservation groups seldom use the practice, considering it a measure of last resort for the most critical land preservation. For the Friends of Klein Fen, now passionate about the fen complex, the 100 acres is just the beginning. The group will continue to support fen restoration and says it would like to work with the district to secure the remainder of the neighboring land. Dittmann envisions a flourishing fen with educational trails.

Scott Kobal said that the district will likely plant native species on the farm field and carefully break drain tiles to restore the fen hydrology without doing damage to neighboring property.

"Trying to protect the hydrology is so important," he says, "and that's what we're hoping to do."

— Elizabeth Riotta