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District debates purchase of property that feeds wetland

Klein fen one of only 22 of its type across the U.S.

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WHEATON -- The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County is expected to make a decision next week on the future of land that nourishes the Klein fen wetlands.

In the meantime, residents who support the district's proposed purchase of the site say they are ready and willing to help restore the site to a natural prairie.

"We're just focused on saving it and restoring it," said Jeannie Leffler, West Chicago resident and director/board member for Friends of Klein Fen. "It has to be done."

While forest commissioners on Tuesday continued to discuss the possible acquisition of some or all of the 205-acre parcel - which is west of Klein Road and across from the West Branch Forest Preserve - they delayed any action on the matter. President D. "Dewey" Pierotti Jr. said he wanted to wait until all commissioners are in attendance to vote. Commissioners Wally Brown of Downers Grove and Joe Cantore of Oakbrook Terrace were absent from Tuesday's meeting.

"This is a significant item," Pierotti said. "I think the proper thing to do is wait until we have a full membership."

Rare wetland

A special call meeting will be held to make a decision, he said. The date is still to be determined, but he said he was hoping to schedule it for early next week. In the interim, there are questions about the acreage and purchase price, he said.

The district is exploring the acquisition of land currently belonging to St. Andrews Golf and Country Club in West Chicago, which is owned by Joe Jemsek and his family. The owners had previously said they never intended to sell the land. But if they must sell the land, or face condemnation, they want a fair price.

Earlier, the family had filed petitions with the city of West Chicago for annexation and rezoning to R-3 residential. Should the land be annexed and rezoned, it would increase the value of the parcel. A public hearing on their request scheduled last month was tabled while the owners and district continued negotiations. However the public hearing will be held tonight on the request.

Residents who want the Forest Preserve District to buy the property say it is necessary to maintain and preserve the Klein fen. Water from the St. Andrews property is vital to the life of the fen.

"They're two separate pieces, but they're definitely dependent on each other," Leffler said.

The fen, which was formed by glaciers 18,000 years ago, is a natural wetland community that is created and maintained by nutrient-rich groundwater flow. The Klein fen is even more rare, as its considered a hanging fen.

"There are only 22 in the whole U.S.," said Carole Biang, a chemical engineer from West Chicago.

On Tuesday members Friends of Klein Fen said the group has gone through the process to incorporate as a not-for-profit fundraising organization. They said the group will have the ability to apply for public and private grants to aid the restoration efforts - some of which might not be available to the forest district as a governmental body.

"We are here for the long run, and stand ready to partner with you," Biang said.

Land buy

Also on Tuesday, commissioners approved the purchase of a 2.5 acre parcel for \$611,900. The property is located on the rear of a larger parcel that has frontage on Stearns Road, just east of Bartlett Road. The owners retained possession of the front of the parcel.

"We think it's a good acquisition because it's an extension of our current holdings there," Pierotti said.

The site is adjacent to Hawk Hollow Forest Preserve in Hanover Park. Funds for the purchase came from the 2006 \$68 million open-space bond referendum.

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