

Unique natural habitat mired in heated debate

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West Chicago Press
Wed Aug 01, 2007, 04:29 PM CDT

West Chicago, IL -

More than 200 acres near prized wetlands have a host of interested parties fighting over the land's fate.

"It's going to be very difficult to make everyone happy," said Dewey Pierotti, president of the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County, which is in negotiations to buy the 200 acres.

The land, owned by St. Andrews Golf and Country Club, is nestled among quiet subdivisions and sits adjacent to a portion of the Forest Preserve of DuPage County, West Branch known as Klein fen, a section of wetlands fed in part by the 200 acres in question.

St. Andrews recently filed a request to have the land annexed into the city of West Chicago, a move that has angered nearby residents and the Forest Preserve, who say the move could have disastrous environmental consequences on the fen.

"They (the Forest Preserve) have invested millions of dollars in creating and protecting the West Branch," said Scott Rothenberg, a nearby homeowner and member of Friends of Klein fen, a group working to prevent development on the land. "If this property is developed in any shape or form it is going to affect the fen."

In a letter to West Chicago Mayor Michael Kwasman dated July 2, Pierotti said the acquisition of the land has been the preserve's No. 1 priority since voters approved a \$68 million referendum in November 2006 to help the preserve buy, improve and maintain natural areas like the fen.

"Until negotiations between the ownership of this parcel and the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County are complete, efforts to annex the property should be put on hold," Pierotti wrote.

Despite the outcry from residents and the Forest Preserve, Kwasman said annexation is in the city's best interest so it has some control over what happens to the land.

"We have no control over what the Forest Preserve is going to do," Kwasman said. "We've seen some of these Forest Preserve acquisitions come out to be a nightmare."

Those "nightmares" could include a dog park, a parking lot, flood lights or other developments that the city could not prohibit unless the land was annexed, Kwasman said.

Pierotti said the forest preserve approached St. Andrews several months ago about purchasing the land and was turned down.

"We took a laissez-faire attitude but then they approached (West Chicago) about annexation," Pierotti said. "In my opinion it was an attempt to raise the market value of the property."

Forest Preserve assessors have valued the land at about \$100,000 per acre, or \$20 million for all 200 acres, but St. Andrews did not provide the Forest Preserve with its own assessment, according to Pierotti.

Attempts to reach St. Andrews representatives were unsuccessful.

Part of St. Andrews' land was annexed into the city in the 1990s to bring city water and sewer to the Meadowwoods subdivision, Kwasman said.

As part of that agreement, the rest of the land went into the city's 1996 comprehensive plan.

Newly annexed property automatically comes in with minimum lot requirements of 40,000 square feet but the comprehensive plan calls for 9,000 square feet and St. Andrews has requested the 9,000 requirement upon annexation.

"We're just keeping with our comprehensive plan," Kwasman said.

Forest Preserve officials have said any development, especially the dense development allowed with 9,000 lots, would endanger the 553 plant species and 231 wildlife species of the West Branch, 10 of which are listed as threatened or endangered in Illinois.

"Once you disturb the natural flow and the natural surface, it will have a negative effect," Pierotti said. "Once man starts screwing with nature, we always screw it up."

About 40 percent of the 200 acres drains directly into the fen according to Forest Preserve and Office of Natural Resources officials. Pierotti said sewage, car pollutants, and storm-water runoff could have irreparable consequences.

Kwasman said plans for development on the land are years, possibly decades, away from consideration.

If and when a developer does come along, minimizing the environmental impact would be the first priority.

"If a developer did come in, the first thing we would do is protect the fen," Kwasman said. "He'd have to go through a lot of hoops before he could even put a shovel in the ground."