

Suburban wetland water source talks continue

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WHEATON -- A decision about the fate of a West Chicago property that provides water to the Klein fen wetlands will have to wait two weeks while the parties continue to talk.

After a two-hour executive session Tuesday, the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County pulled from its agenda the ordinance calling for the "acquisition through negotiation or condemnation" of property for a West Branch addition.

"(The land owners) want to continue the negotiations, and we said that we would do that only if they would pull their request pursuing the annexation during the same time," said President D. "Dewey" Pierotti Jr.

All in the family

The land is owned by St. Andrews Golf and Country Club in West Chicago, which is owned by Joe Jemsek and his family. The owners said they never intended to sell the land. Marianne Hinckley, Jemsek's daughter, said the parcel is "our security blanket."

In the last 10 years, they have been approached by 20 different developers, all of which they turned down.

"We would like to keep it farmland as long as we can," she said.

The family had filed petitions with the city of West Chicago for annexation and rezoning to R-3 residential. A public hearing was scheduled to take place on their request Tuesday night; however, because of the decision during the forest preserve meeting, the hearing was put on hold. Should the land be annexed and rezoned, it would increase the value of the parcel.

Gerard Hinckley, president of St. Andrews, said the family does not want to give up the land, but if it must sell - or face condemnation - they want a fair price.

"We're in a position where it's almost take it or leave it, and if it's take it, we (want) a fair price," he said.

Residents speak out

More than a dozen residents spoke out on the purchase during the forest district meeting, which was standing-room only. The majority of those speaking urged the district to purchase the 205-acre parcel of land, which is west of Klein Road and across from the West Branch Forest Preserve. The land, they said, is necessary to maintaining and preserving the Klein fen.

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.

"If you take away the water, you destroy the fen," said Scott Rothenberg, a West Chicago resident and member of Friends of Klein Fen.

"As taxpayers we find it is extremely important to use the funds that are still available from the referendum to purchase the property," said Cathy Werner of West Chicago.

In November voters approved a \$68 million open space bond referendum. The site is likely to cost the district at least \$20 million.

The residents urged the district to purchase the entire 205-acre parcel to maintain the groundwater source. Some said, if only part of the site is purchased, there could still be negative impacts on the fen. The district, however, has not ruled out purchasing a portion of the site.

"Our initial interest is in the entire 205 acres, but we're willing to work out some sort of settlement agreement," Pierotti said. "We're in the middle, and we know no matter what we do, nobody's going to be happy."

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