

DCNR commends efforts, expresses concern over White's Woods

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The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' Bureau of Forestry commends White Township for taking an active role and approach to managing its community forests and trees, including the White's Woods Nature Center covering nearly 250 acres along the Indiana Borough line.

However, the bureau said in a long-awaited, nine-page comment posted on the township website, "we are concerned about what appears to us as a disconnect among the stated goals, the proposed management activities and practices, and the wishes and desires of the public."

The DCNR recommendations were posted online after being received Wednesday by the township board.

"We understand the considerable effort and investment in the current draft, and that it was based on a template that our agency provided," the Bureau of Forestry said, but the state agency urged the township to revise that plan "to fully maximize its role for helping to achieve community values and interests."

It urged the township to "implement a public input process to help inform both development and implementation of a forest stewardship plan," saying "it is critical for the township to understand

the wishes and desires of its residents, and most importantly, identifying and understanding the values citizens hold and expect of these woodlands.”

DCNR was responding to the township’s a 100-page draft of a five-year blueprint for stewardship of township properties, including White’s Woods, that was approved in June 2020 after what Manager Milt Lady termed “a collaborative effort” between township officials and consultant Millstone Land Management LLC.

The plan and the DCNR response would face scrutiny from a proposed five-member committee board Chairman George Lenz wants his fellow supervisors to establish, once the lawsuit by Friends of White’s Woods against the township is resolved in Indiana County Common Pleas Court. Lenz said he did not know when that will happen.

The court battle continued with a March 30 hearing before Common Pleas Senior Judge William J. Martin.

Martin had taken up the case as the county’s president judge but held onto it after his term ended and his status as a senior judge began.

He heard the township’s Greensburg attorney Bernard P. Matthews Jr. move for summary judgment and FWW’s Pittsburgh attorney Tim Fitchett of Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services counter that argument.

Lenz wants Michael T. Wolf of Appalachian Forest Consultants of suburban Johnstown to chair that panel. Fellow foresters David E. Beale of Elderton, who put together a White’s Woods study in 1995, and David Babyak, who was called in by the township board in 2007, also would be on that committee.

Township Supervisor Gail McCauley also would serve, while Lenz wants a fifth member from the community, suggesting an unnamed resident who wrote a letter about White’s Woods to the supervisors some time ago.

The DCNR bureau reviewed the FWW complaint against the township, noticing a reference to “a recommended 240-acre shelterwood harvest to be completed on the White’s Woods Tract. This type of harvest is not referenced in the draft stewardship plan, and we question if this is the Township’s intent.”

The harvest that is referenced can be found in the 95-page stewardship plan prepared by Michael Lawer of Marion Center-based Millstone and issued last summer.

“It is in the best interest of White Township to utilize sustainable selective harvests to help offset the costs of land management,” Lawer wrote. “It is not the primary goal to make economic gains on the sale of timber, but rather to selectively harvest trees with the goal of improving forest health.”

The DCNR response is dated March 23 and is divided between categories of “Landowner Goals and Proposed Management Activities,” “Public Input Process,” “Forest Resource Inventory” and specific forest management recommendations.

It said “any proposed timber management should be awarded to a contractor through a sealed bid process and administered by an independent consulting forester.”

Regarding plans that include removal of invasive plants, the BOF said “improving the health and sustainability of all the township properties is admirable, and a commonly-used forest management goal.”

However, the DCNR bureau went on, “the BOF is highly concerned with the proposed forest mulching practice and potential unintended consequences of this practice.”

It also said “revenue generation from harvesting timber is a legitimate and often beneficial forest management activity. Income from timber sales could help to defray costs of other activities, harvesting can help to create and improve habitat conditions for certain wildlife, improve safety and forest health by removing dead or dying trees, and help to support local jobs and the economy.”

The bureau urged the township to “communicate its revenue generation objectives, and then develop a plan for harvesting considering the other goals and values of the properties,” adding, “harvesting could help to enhance certain goals, while conflicting with others.”

The bureau expressed concern about recreational uses of township properties, though it commended the township for aiming to enhance such opportunities, saying, “without careful planning, some areas may suffer from overuse, resulting in environmental damage and reduced recreation benefits.”

“Based on review of the goals as written, it also appears that Aesthetics and Safety are important goals,” the DCNR bureau said.

However, it asked, “what are the primary aesthetic values and expectations, and how are citizens’ perspectives incorporated into this goal? Public input could help to understand nuances around aesthetics and the township’s wooded properties.”

It said township concerns are valid with regards to public safety.

“Dead trees and trees dying from insect or disease outbreaks near people can damage property in parking areas or even injure people along trails,” the bureau wrote.

“However, individual dead/dying trees scattered throughout the forest, away from trails or infrastructure are less cause for concern and are not typically considered as a sole justification for harvesting.”

The Bureau of Forestry said its goals and recommendations are meant to be helpful and constructive.

“We welcome continued discussions with the township and its constituents to further explore and explain our recommendations,” the bureau wrote. “Additionally, we offer continued involvement of our local Service Forester and expertise from specialists in our Central Office on wildlife habitat, botany, and riparian restoration; and recreation management advice from the (DCNR) Bureau of Recreation and Conservation as needed.”