

Featured

Residents express concerns regarding IUP CO-OP's park maintenance plan

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Six years after residents and activists criticized a forestry management plan put forth by White Township officials, logging concerns have returned to the conversation as the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Student Cooperative Association board of directors approved an agreement with Millstone Land Management for “forestry and land stewardship services.”

Though the White’s Woods plan by White Township would eventually get revised and the blessing of the state’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, information about the Co-op forestry plan is limited.

According to a news release posted on the Co-op Recreational Park website, the project is split into four phases, with assessment and survey work beginning in May and a concluding date of sometime next year.

Phases two and four would see hazardous tree identification, removal and mitigation along the park’s commonly used areas, trail maintenance, vegetation management, “selective” thinning



and pruning to “improve forest health aesthetics and sightlines, and invasive species control,” erosion control, using “best management practices,” and other safety and aesthetic improvements.

The trail is currently closed as the project moves into its next phase.

“The Co-op Recreational Park is an incredible resource for IUP,” IUP Student Co-op CEO Lou Garzarelli said in the news release, “and we are committed to its continued health and the safety of visitors using the property. Like any property, the park requires assessment and maintenance, especially in light of storms, including winter storms, that damage the trails,” he said.

“Millstone Land Management’s work will maintain and enhance our existing forest trails and surrounding woodland areas with a focus on safety, accessibility, aesthetics and sustainable recreational use.”

Both Garzarelli and IUP Co-op Chair Joshua Castle were not immediately available to comment further on the project.

IUP students, alumni and Friends of White’s Woods members say the work would be a detriment to the park and the broader Whites Woods Nature Center.

“The preliminary work in the College Lodge forest by Millstone Land Management, along with the larger outlines of a proposed project in the College Lodge forest ... points to plans for enormous change in the forest ecosystems,” the Friends of White’s Woods board wrote in a letter addressed to the Co-op board. “The entire character of the College Lodge forest will be changed, and the negative impact on WWNC could likely be substantial.”

The College Lodge property is open for use to valid I-Card holders, which are given to students and others who pay the university’s student activity fee, according to IUP Co-op officials.

Mike Wolf, a forester and partner with the Johnstown-based Appalachian Forest Consultants said, in a letter to Friends of White’s Woods, that despite the restrictions on use, “forests and their functions do not respect property lines.”

“The Student Cooperative Association (SCA) property and White’s Woods (WW) certainly share an incredible forest that has innumerable benefits,” he writes. “Similar to WW, the SCA forest is unique in that it contains abundant large trees and offers an aesthetic that is incredible. Mature forests like WW and SCA are becoming hard to find and to have these adjacent properties combining and even multiplying their individual benefits is a win-win.”

After walking the property, Wolf, who is in the business of selling timber through forest management plans spanning more than 10 years, questioned whether the trees chosen for removal were done so for profit purposes, describing a “vast number” of trees marked for their “individual and market value.” And while he does not necessarily condemn the Co-op for wanting to make money off the project, he said that goal does not align with the stated goals of the project.

“I am also saying that harvesting all those painted trees will actually detract from SCA’s ability to accomplish some of their stated goals,” he writes in his letter.

“Will harvesting all the painted trees improve forest health? No. Will harvesting all the painted trees improve aesthetics? No. Will harvesting all the painted trees improve sightliness? No. Will harvesting all the painted trees enhance visual quality? No. Will harvesting all the painted trees enhance the natural character of the forest landscape? No. However, I will say, there are probably 25 local loggers/timber buyers that would have a very strong desire to harvest all the painted trees, which would also create a great deal of revenue for SCA.”

IUP students and alumni have also spoken out against the project, recounting the joy the forests brought them. One student, Sara Stewart, who is pursuing a graduate degree in counseling, said she frequently disc golfs and hikes on the property, and even held her wedding at the College Lodge.

“One of my favorite — and a lot of people’s favorite — classes in our program is a wellness class taught by Dr. Lorrain Guth in the early summer,” she said in an email to the Gazette. “It’s magical. These woods are important to a lot of our community — IUP and beyond, and I’ve been dismayed, to put it mildly, to see the secrecy and hostility from the IUP Co-op board around this tree removal project.”

She cited a [Change.org](#) petition, which garnered 950 verified signatures, to show the dismay many have with the project, and said she is “disappointed” in IUP leadership for keeping the university community in the dark.

Sara King, Friends of White’s Woods president, acknowledged that, while part of the White’s Woods forest, it is ultimately an area under the stewardship of the IUP Co-op board; therefore, it would be up to the IUP community to voice approval of or opposition to the plan.

A group of IUP faculty, alumni, the public and forest neighbors have joined together to form Save the IUP Co-op Forest, and have contacted “numerous other regional environmental groups.”

Friends of White’s Woods did have a meeting June 17 with Garzarelli and other Co-op officials, who she said listened to concerns Friends of White’s Woods brought up, including extensive damage to trees by heavy machinery, possible disruption to a federally protected species of bat, an “explosion” of invasive plant as a result of canopy removal and “reduced changes of successful forest regeneration.”

However, despite calls to release more information and to have a certified arborist inspect the site by several parties, he said in the meeting that no further information will be released.

At a July 10 meeting, Castle described the project as “substantial” and that anyone who does not have an I-Card is regarded as a trespasser. He also said the Co-op is not ready to begin enforcement but would do so if possible. While King was not present, Dr. Amanda Poole, a

professor of anthropology at IUP, did confirm that information was correct in an email to the Gazette.

“That is a remarkable policy change and seems unfortunate for our community,” King said.

Friends of White’s Woods is focused on the WWNC but remains concerned about the short- and long-term impacts of the Co-op project, according to King.

“It would be wonderful if the entire 500-acre tract — the combined IUP Co-op forest and the White’s Woods Nature Center — could both be allowed to mature into old growth and be enrolled in the Old Growth Forest Network, she said.

Folks are able to contact savetheiupcoopforest@gmail.com to get involved with the organization.