



Friends of White's Woods, Inc.

P.O. Box 1271
Indiana, PA. 15701

info@friendsofwhiteswoods.org

July 16, 2020

White Township Supervisors
Indian Springs Road
Indiana, PA 15701

Dear White Township Supervisors:

White's Woods is a much-used Nature Center made possible by PA Project 70 monies. It was originally dedicated, and for decades has been used, as a forested recreation area, kept in its natural state. A sound stewardship plan for White's Woods must have at its core the clear recognition that this park is valuable because it offers unique recreational opportunities—and incomparable experiences—in a woodland area. As such, the design of the current Draft White Township Stewardship plan was flawed from the outset on two critical dimensions:

- (1) It fails to recognize that the management needs of the 250-acre White's Woods Nature Center (WWNC) differ profoundly from those of the small White Township community parks, as well as from the White Township parks designated for extensive development for use for team sports and large group activities. The WWNC requires a separate stewardship plan.
- (2) It also fails to recognize the character of this natural area as a park: The WWNC is not, and must not be construed as, a timber farm.

The WWNC, left in its natural state, is an enormously valuable community asset—one that promises to become ever-more valuable to the community in the future. In a time that increasingly appears to be defined by a long-term global pandemic, humans need access to, and benefit hugely from, the opportunity to spend time in a natural area that is open to the public.

Beyond this, Americans, particularly young people, are increasingly devoted to “green space” experiences and activities. Natural areas that provide the opportunity for hiking, biking, cross-country skiing, bird watching, observation of plants and animals—for spiritual and physical renewal—are widely-regarded as “economic-drivers” for long-term development in rural communities. The Center for Rural Affairs, a nationally-leading organization devoted to revitalizing rural America, argues that: “In the future, access to uncrowded natural land will be increasingly hard to come by, and it will be an increasingly valuable asset for communities. Communities that offer it will have a leg up in attracting families to start businesses and drive revitalization.”

What's more, threats associated with climate change are prompting both environmental non-profit organizations and industries to dedicate funds for “carbon capture” (some estimated to be released to

Indiana County next year): They are providing financial support to help ensure that large-acreage forested areas are left intact.

Friends of White's Woods (FWW) had only ten weeks to alert the community to White Township plans to (1) destroy the forest floor and "open the canopy" in the WWNC in a misguided "plan" to control invasive plant species and (2) to harvest an extraordinary amount of timber at rates (per numbered "unit") far greater than that deemed "excessive" by DCNR when evaluating a similar plan in 2008.

The response from the public, in the midst of a pandemic when person-to-person contact has been almost impossible, has been extraordinary. As the documents in this binder make clear, citizens want the WWNC to be kept as a natural area. Large numbers of people, on very short notice, wrote letters, signed a petition, filled out surveys, and sent emails. (See the surveys, petitions, and letters that follow.) Even though severely limited in our ability to contact people, FWW discovered that citizen opposition to timbering WWNC is as profound—if not more so—as in years past.

In 1995, the first time the Supervisors proposed to timber White's Woods, the Township mailed a survey to voters, finding that **62%** (1527 of the 2463 total respondents) did **NOT** want White's Woods selectively timbered (31% approved of the timbering plan while 7% had no opinion).

In April, 2007, the Indiana Gazette announced the results of an online survey which asked the question: "Do you think timbering should be allowed in White's Woods?" The voting response (747 votes) set a record for any single question posed online by the Gazette. The results were:

- **69.2%** believe timbering should not be allowed in White's Woods.
- 22.6% believed removing some trees from the area would ultimately be beneficial.
- 8.2% thought further study was needed.

And in June, 2007, Friends of White's Woods presented the White Township Supervisors with a petition signed by over 1,000 citizens opposed to that timbering plan.

This year, 98% of those who completed the FWW survey want the White's Woods Nature Center to remain in its natural state. In addition, a total of 1,240 individuals who reside in zip codes 15000-16999 (Western Pennsylvania) signed a petition to protect the woods, stop timbering, and preserve this Project 70 natural area. Nearly two-thirds of these signatories live within a forty-minute drive of the park, the large majority of these residing within White Township or the Indiana Borough.

For 25 years citizens and stakeholders have been clear: Do not timber White's Woods. This year, the needlessly destructive invasive plant species treatment plan, which itself involves timbering, has been rejected with the same force. If anything, the conviction by citizens that White's Woods be kept as a natural area is stronger than ever before.

Since late April, when the plan to rototill and timber WW was discovered, FWW, in addition to alerting the public, also sought the expertise of independent biologists and foresters, and hired a much-experienced forester to conduct a review, as well.

All of these consultants concluded that the White Township invasive treatment plan is a terrible mistake and one that is likely to result in the future explosion, rather than reduction, of invasive plant species. Opening the canopy with extensive timbering will result not only in the indefensible destruction of this valuable park, but will also miserably fail to meet any stated goal.

In his July 2, 2020 evaluation, forester Mike Wolf observed that the plan posted for public comment—as it pertains to White’s Woods—is a timbering, rather than a stewardship, plan. Mr. Wolf’s reservations about this plan are grave:

From my initial, on-site review of White Township properties, it is apparent that following Millstone’s plan creates the biggest risk to White’s Woods. Millstone’s plan was written to apply to all of White Township properties, and therefore this review (below) can apply to all locations. However, White’s Woods is obviously at greatest risk for catastrophic results.

A WWNC stewardship plan should holistically address community values (Eschenmann, April 27, 2020) and these values, along with extensive stakeholder input, should drive both the development of the plan and its execution.

FWW strongly believes that the WWNC should be kept as a natural area and that a comprehensive, evidence-based park management plan be developed by experts in conservation, park management, recreation, biology, ecology, hydrology, forestry, and the input from all of the park’s stakeholders, including Indiana Borough and those of us who frequent its trails each day.

We need a plan that is collectively developed by all relevant experts and invested stakeholders. This plan should be updated regularly and, along with stakeholder input, guide further management of this natural area park. FWW would welcome the opportunity to work with White Township so that we can, together, meet these goals.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors,
Friends of White’s Woods