



Friends of White's Woods, Inc.

P.O. Box 1271
Indiana, PA 15701

September 9, 2022

White Township Supervisors
Indian Springs Road
Indiana, PA 15701

Dear White Township Supervisors Lenz, Gallo, Gemmell, Gillette, and McCauley:

Although the number of Pennsylvania hunters is in decline, there is no question that the majority of the Pennsylvania public - including Indiana County residents - still support hunting.

The question regarding hunting that lingers for local residents is far more focused: Under what circumstances is hunting safe in a public park?

The White Township Board of Supervisors has long been concerned about public safety in parks, of course, first establishing an ordinance that banned the discharge of firearms on White Township properties and, subsequently (January, 2020) - in response to citizens' concerns about safety related to bow hunting in White's Woods - amending that ordinance to ban all hunting on Township properties, except in exceptional circumstances.

Two recent surveys, one in September, 2021, and the second in June, 2022, make it clear that the public concern about citizen safety, as raised in 2020, remains.

In the 2021 Friends of White's Woods survey, distributed to multiple community groups, through downtown businesses, social media, and (in person) at the White's Woods 12th Street Entrance, 71% of the 150 citizens surveyed opposed hunting in White's Woods and 29% support limited hunting for a week (16%) or for the winter bow-hunting season (14%).

In the 2022 IUP *Community Interest Study*, distributed to ten community organizations, 57% of the 289 respondents, opposed deer hunting in White's Woods, while 24% expressed support for this initiative (the remainder indicated that they were neutral).

The collective data, including information received by the Township in the small bow-hunting citizen/expert discussion session held in the S & T Arena, is clear: In our community, at this time, bow-hunting in White's Woods is, at best, controversial.

Documents indicate that the Township is at least somewhat aware of this controversy. In the Township's Draft Deer Management Program, staff notation indicates concern that citizen opposition is significant (staff notation in red):

11. Must place the provided vehicle identification tag on the dash of a parked vehicle during hunts.

Consider using another form of reporting when they hunt/park to prevent unwanted attention from non-hunters – possibly text message or email check in with vehicle make, model, color and parking location

There are multiple reasons that proceeding with this controversial plan, as devised, at this time, is problematic.

First, the proposed deer hunt in White's Woods will be the first White's Woods management action since the inception of the White Township Stewardship Committee that has been charged with developing a stewardship plan, or guidelines, for the maintenance and protection of our Nature Center. The Stewardship Committee discussed the need for deer management at their August, 2022, meeting. And this committee has repeatedly focused on the need to work in such a way as to garner increased public trust. A first step in White's Woods management - an unpopular deer hunt - in the absence of any effort to secure public support, or to seriously consider alternatives, seems severely misguided.

Also, there still appear to be significant, unaddressed concerns regarding the safety of walkers, runners, hikers, and bikers in White's Woods during active bow hunting. For instance, the trails are very close together and, so far, there has been no announced provision that prohibits shooting near, toward, or across trails. Township attempts to limit park-users knowledge of active hunters-in-the-woods would seem to only increase the safety risk for regular park users.

In addition, a decision to move forward without attempting to secure public support is contrary to all expert recommendations. The document *Methods for Managing Deer in Populated Areas* (Human Wildlife Conflicts Working Group, Sponsored by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies) underscores the need to secure public trust.

“Deliberative discussions are needed to assess local community values, economic effects, available science, and resident feedback. These conversations are often emotional, and reaching consensus may be difficult and time-consuming (p. 11).

“The first challenge is to identify the problem and set clear objectives to achieve success. This can be difficult because social tolerance of deer in municipalities varies, with some residents viewing deer as a benefit to the community and others viewing deer as a detriment. . . . Those opposed to urban deer often call for strategies to decrease deer densities in an effort to reduce deer-vehicle collisions, address zoonotic diseases risks to humans, alleviate material damage to lawns and gardens, and address public safety concerns (p. 6).

Some citizens may oppose hunting from the aspect of a concern for safety believing that they may be endangered by the discharge of weapons, even arrows from bows or crossbows. Authorities should be able to alleviate these fears by creating regulations that will ensure the safety of the public.” (p. 42).

Friends of White's Woods would like to underscore that our organization is fully aware of the benefits of deer management for the purpose of protecting the forest's native plant understory. Our question is only how one best achieves that goal. As noted in the aforementioned Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies deer management document:

“While the various mitigation techniques are divided into broad categories, within each category there are typically several options for tailoring a program to a community's needs, resident's tolerances, and the landscape within a particular city. It

must be noted that with any deer management program public support is critical (p. 41).

Just a few months ago Burrell Township decided to ban hunting in Saylor Park, in recognition of the difficulty of adequately managing legal hunting on public property.

Eighty percent of park users surveyed in 2020 and 57% of the general population sampled in 2022 indicated that they might regard the park as too dangerous for regular use when hunting is taking place in White's Woods.

No management activity in White's Woods, even one aimed to preserve the ecological value of the forest, should reduce the passive recreational opportunities such as walking, hiking, running, and birdwatching. One management goal should not detract from the other.

Friends of White's Woods urges White Township to take another look at safety issues and take the extra time to come up with an approach to deer management that enjoys public support and as such, strengthens, rather than weakens, the credibility of the new Stewardship Committee.

On behalf of the Friends of White's Woods Board of Directors,

Sara King, President
Friends of White's Woods

cc: White Township Stewardship Committee:

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David Dahlheimer
Sierra Davis
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