

White's Woods debate closer to conclusion

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FOR THE DISPATCH

INDIANA--An ongoing debate over a timbering plan for White's Woods in White Township cooled down considerably Wednesday evening, as the Friends of White's Woods and the township supervisors had an amiable meeting that appeared satisfying to both parties.

It was in marked contrast to other meetings since FWW organized in the spring in opposition to selective timbering of the popular nature reserve.

Addressing the board at its regularly scheduled meeting, Susan Dahlheimer, White Township resident and FWW acting chair, spoke of a letter she delivered earlier in the day to the supervisors, asking them to suspend all action on timbering White's Woods while FWW pursues options to buy

the property.

The supervisors asked if FWW was committed to the purchase. A small, respectful crowd of FWW, about one-third of those who showed up on June 13, was present.

"We're already investigating, but this is new to us and we need time to find funding sources," Dahlheimer said, requesting a motion to delay implementation of the current township management plan.

Two weeks ago, Supervisor George Lenz suggested the board look into selling White's Woods to FWW for \$300,000, to be paid over 20 years. "We won't be buying chain saws tomorrow, or anything like that. I would like to see you folks and others like you buy White's Woods off of us and be the guardians of it," he said.

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In response to that suggestion, Dahlheimer's letter said, "We are actively pursuing this option and ready and able to accept your offer ... this creative solution would satisfy the concern of all parties."

Supervisors Chairman Robert Overdorff said no motion was necessary, since the supervisors said at their last meeting they did not intend to immediately proceed with implementing the plan designed by local forester Dave Babyak.

Called a forest stewardship and management plan, the plan was approved unanimously by the six supervisors on June 13 for what they said is the health of the forest and the safety of those who use it for recreational purposes.

It would involve intermittent thinnings of 555,000 board feet of timber, reaping approximately \$166,000 over a period of 10 years.

Township Manager Larry Garner, who met with Dahlheimer and others earlier to discuss the possibility of a sale, said it will take time to work out an actual price and the legal aspects of such a property transfer.

White's Woods was purchased with state funds and state officials will have to OK disposal of the property, he said.

Garner said he received a second letter from FWW, requesting copies of documents related to the history of White's Woods.

It will take time and work to make all those available, he said.

After the meeting, Dahlheimer said FWW is looking into both possible sources of funding and groups that may be interested in caring for the woods.

One preservation group mentioned is the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

"Conservancies do this all over the country. It's standard business," said

Lawrence Kruckman of Indiana.

He said FWW "hoped to turn the heat down" with their proposal, knowing both sides are concerned about the future of the woods.

Kruckman said the group has also considered "other avenues" of action.

He contended that the public meeting held June 11 was illegal because it was not posted properly beforehand.

"Friends of White's Woods is overlooking that, given what we heard tonight," he said Wednesday, noting that township officials "seem to want to work with us, and we're eager for that to happen.

"But if this avenue collapses, we'll pursue others," he added, indicating legal steps may be pursued to prevent timbering.

As part of the agenda for the meeting, several pieces of correspondence related to White's Woods were listed. At Kruckman's request, it

was noted state Sen. Donald White had forwarded a letter to the board from local entrepreneur Wayne Gorell, who expressed displeasure with the adopted management plan.

Gorell's letter stated that if Yellowstone National Park can resist timbering, hopefully "our little corner of nature" could also be protected.

Thomas Fitzgerald, of New Florence, who retired after 41 years as a forester with the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Bureau of Forestry, also wrote the supervisors, in support of the plan.

He said he attended the public meeting "as an outsider," had read the plan online and called it "excellent."

He wrote, "Most of the comments I heard were based on emotions, perceived amenity values, and fear of change."