



## [Can White Township see the forest for the trees?](#)

Posted on [July 28, 2023](#) by [David Loomis](#)



Yard sign, Indiana borough, April 11, 2023.

### *White's Woods chronicle*

By Sara King

WHITE TOWNSHIP — Some township supervisors have recently made clear that they see White's Woods as a natural area — one that, like forests across time, will mature naturally.

Supervisor Rich Gallo, in particular, has publicly recognized the importance of the immense public input aimed to save the forest that has been gathered over the last decades.

Finally, we're beginning to step away from the [timbering-for-the health-of-the-forest model](#) that has so thoroughly dominated White Township misperception since 1995 — and from the [open rejection of public input](#) by some supervisors that citizens heard in April 2020.

We know we need a stewardship plan that protects our natural area, preserves its tight canopy, recognizes the vitality of natural forest maturation processes, and monitors endangered, at-risk and vulnerable species.

We need a plan that recognizes the deep conviction among the general public about the importance of leaving the natural area intact.

Has such a plan taken shape? No.

Is the township's [Stewardship Committee](#) inching toward a good understanding of our public natural area and how to preserve it? Does the committee respect the public input that the township has received? It is sometimes really hard to tell.

WHAT HAS the committee learned?

This could be good news. At their April 20 meeting, committee members David Dahlheimer and Sierra Davis presented a slide show summing [what the committee has learned](#) from consultants:

- The canopy should be protected;
- The overstory is healthy and diverse;
- Invasive plants and deer browse need to be addressed in the understory;
- Natural forest maturation processes work;
- Ecosystem data, including that related to at-risk species, is important for understanding our natural area;
- Joining the Old Growth Forest Network protects the forest and benefits the community;
- Public opinion should drive all management decisions;
- 28 years of public opinion says that White's Woods should remain as a natural area; and,
- Climate change is here – and we need to keep the trees that we have.

So, what's the (possible) bad news? A lot of questions remain:

*WHY did committee chair Barbara Hauge suggest to a local organization recently that, depending on community engagement and what the committee's goals are, there might be reasons to cut some trees? A desire to sequester more carbon, [she explained](#), might lead the committee to recommend cutting some trees.*

- [DCNR](#) cautions that we need to [keep the forests that we have](#) to maximize carbon sequestration. Old trees keep growing and, according to a [United States Geological](#)

[Survey report](#), “[t]his continuously increasing growth rate means that on an individual basis, large, old trees are better at absorbing carbon from the atmosphere.” Cutting down big trees releases the stored carbon back into the atmosphere.

- Natural area experts *and* [all committee consultants](#) are emphatic: The tight canopy must be protected to prevent explosive growth of invasive plants; the underground mycelium network that nourishes trees, along with the forest floor that holds the rich seed bank for future regeneration, needs to be preserved.

*DOES the committee understand why least-intrusive management steps are critical — and what those least-intrusive steps should look like?*

- Committee consultants, along with over a dozen [natural area management resource documents](#), emphasize the need to protect the canopy, avoid use of heavy machinery, and, sometimes, plant trees. (There is no mention of timbering — that is, the removal of any trees — in a natural area.)
- [All consultants](#) (except one, who is an industrial forester) made clear that natural canopy gaps are sufficient for regeneration. And every consultant emphasized that any timbering or timber management in our natural area would backfire if conducted before invasive plants and deer-browse are under control (which will take at least a decade or two).

But it is not yet clear that the committee understands what they’ve heard.

*DOES the committee understand how Pennsylvania natural areas are typically managed?*

A recent consultation with the natural areas manager of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC) made clear that no timbering occurs on the [WPC’s 14,000 acres of natural area](#), with but one exception: a small plot set aside to demonstrate the impact of various types of timbering methods.

FWW has provided the committee with access to a dozen [public land management plans](#) and even more [natural area resource documents](#).



Sunset, White's Woods, June 30, 2020. Photo: Cheri Hinchman Widzowski/Facebook

*DOES the committee truly understand the public's input?*

Citizens have weighed in [over 5,000 times](#) to say that White's Woods should be left as a natural area and should not be timbered.

Anyone and everyone has had extensive opportunity to provide input — through surveys, a ballot initiative, petitions, invited email to White Township, and public meetings. The committee has [recent data](#), [long-term data](#), and [email responses](#) to a township request for input.

But the committee is now setting up new “public engagement” events, though the reasons for this are both unexplained and indiscernible.

When the committee makes recommendations and the stewardship plan is drafted, it must be posted for public review. But the committee hasn't made any recommendations yet! So, it is very hard to understand why the committee has decided to meet with select organizations now.

The goals of any stewardship plan should be driven by public input and rooted in public values. The public has worked hard for decades to voice their concerns: White's Woods should be protected as a natural area. Is the committee listening?

*WHY does the committee keep talking about timbering?*

At the July 20 committee meeting, committee member Jeff Geesey commented, “When you say ‘timbering,’ everybody has the notion that the woods are going to be clearcut. I don’t think timbering, I think ‘selective harvesting.’”

---

**When you say ‘timbering,’ everybody has the notion the woods are going to be clearcut. I don’t think timbering. I think ‘selective harvesting.’**

— *Jeffrey Geesey, member, White Township Stewardship Committee, July 20, 2023*

---

Selective timbering, selection timbering, [high-grading](#), thinning, selective harvesting: All are timbering. All are methods employed in industrial forestry for managing a crop forest.

None have a role in ecological management of a natural area.

The public was specifically asked about selective timbering in the [2022 White’s Woods Community Interest Study](#), and the majority rejected that. And over 1,000 people [signed a petition](#) in 2020 specifically rejecting selective timbering, as well.

Leave it as a natural area. Don’t timber.

*IS THE the committee aware that most [Pennsylvania forests are now changing](#) from predominantly red oak to red maple?*

There are [plenty of saplings for forest regeneration in White’s Woods](#). The surprise is that a higher percentage than would have been expected in the past are red maple. This is a change that is happening all across forests in the northeast, including Pennsylvania.

Climate change, soil acidification, suppression of wildfire (which encourages oak regeneration), and excessive deer-browse [all](#) play a role in our state’s transforming forests. Deer-browse is the only variable in this list that is really possible to address in the short-term, though the means for effective deer-browse control varies with property/forest characteristics.

*DOES the committee understand that it is possible to use fencing to control deer-browse in White’s Woods?*

At their July 20 meeting, committee member Geesey argued that the township is not in a position to encase all 243 acres of White's Woods in deer-proof fencing.

No one asked them to.

All consultants have suggested only small-area fencing in naturally occurring canopy gaps.

*DOES the committee understand that the preponderance of the data makes clear that recreational hunting is not an effective way to promote understory regeneration of red oak seedlings? (Red maples are thriving.)*



Let's be clear here: Friends of White's Woods does not oppose hunting. Friends of White's Woods does see the need to control deer-browse to promote understory regeneration of oak seedlings.

So, the question here is: What are the *effective ways* of controlling deer-browse to promote regeneration of oak seedlings?

According to [a 10-year study](#) by the Cornell deer management project, "Neither sterilization nor recreational hunting reduced deer browse rates and neither appears able to achieve reductions in deer populations or their impacts."

*DOES the committee understand the impact of climate change on such things as tree, plant and animal species migration or forest ecosystem transformation?*

[DCNR is doing much work on this question](#), and this information has been shared with the committee. But is the committee aware that tulip poplars and red maples are [among the trees rated as most resilient](#) in our ongoing climate change?

Township Manager Chris Anderson has recently stepped in to work with Dr. Mike Tyree regarding minimally invasive management of naturally occurring canopy gaps in White's Woods. (FWW contacted Tyree to solicit his expert advice.) That is real step forward.

BUT IT TAKES a lot of work to get past the problem of “not being able to see the forest for the trees.” It isn't clear that we've solved the problem yet.

---

*Sara King, of White Township, is president of Friends of White's Woods. She is an emeritus professor of psychology at Saint Francis University.*

**Share this:**

- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Email](#)
-