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MORE THAN 50 community members hiked the perimeter of White's Woods Tuesday evening to oppose a proposed forest stewardship and management plan that calls for the removal of 555,000 board-feet of trees over a 10-year span.

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Residents protest plan that calls for tree removal in White's Woods

By **MARGARET HARPER**
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In the heart of the forest at White's Woods Nature Center, the roots of the mighty poplar, oak and maple tree grow deep in a land unharvested for more than 50 years.

Likewise, the roots of controversy about how to manage the 245-acre forest have taken hold in White Township, and both sides of the decade-old debate claim to want the same thing: what's best for the land.

More than 50 community members fighting a proposed

forest stewardship and management plan hiked a trail along the perimeter of the peaceful woods Tuesday evening to raise awareness of the issue and call attention to the natural resources the area provides.

The plan, drafted by local forester Dave Babyak, calls for the removal of 555,000 board-feet of trees from the forest in a 10-year period, according to a March report from Babyak to White Township supervisors.

According to Babyak's projections, the proposed harvested timber translates to 61

percent of the forest's estimated growth over the next 10 years.

If harvested today, the timber would be worth \$166,000, he said. There has been no mention as to what the profits would fund.

Right now, there are 2.65 million board feet of marketable saw timber in the forest. A 1995 inventory showed 1.9 million board feet, Babyak said.

Babyak and White Township officials say they see the plan as a way to manage the forest to promote growth.

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By taking out the trees that are expected to die or are choking the growth of healthier trees, the forest can flourish, Babyak says.

But some community members, including the group Friends of White's Woods, disagree on many points. Even partial deforestation, members say, is a desecration of the land's intended use.

"The purpose of White's Woods Nature Center is recreation, conservation and historical preservation," said Andy Davis, who spearheaded the event. "Selected timbering doesn't mesh with the purpose of the land."

Many of the hikers were among those who fought against a similar plan 12 years ago. On Tuesday Dave Dahlheimer wore a green "Friends of White's Woods" T-shirt that the group made in 1995 when the issue first erupted. Now, he and his wife Susan, of Edgewood Avenue, are back to fight again.

Dahlheimer and other members believe it's wrong for the White Township supervisors to decide on the fate of the forest without public input, he said. Because the land was purchased with public funds from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources intended to support conservation, he said he believes the public should have a say.

He also said the proof to support his claim is as simple as reading the sign at the entrance that reads: "This is a gift from the people of White Township to the community."

"The sign says it all," he said.

Jon Pina, a safety health and environmental professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, spoke about some possible negative effects of removing trees from the forest. The loss of shade causes a warming effect, and sometimes invasive species can overtake the forest floor, he said. Multi-flora rose is one of those invasive species. The low-growing shrub, he said, is razor-sharp and thrives after sun is able to reach the forest floor.

Various other concerns percolate within the group. Dahlheimer and Indiana resident Tom Miller want to know how the plan would affect water runoff and hydrology after the forest is cut. Other

members questioned if there have been comprehensive studies about the animals that live in the woods. Pina pointed out rare trees while hiking, such as a wild black cherry, a favorite of woodpeckers.

The plan allows for 22 acres of the area to be left untouched as a nature reserve, according to Babyak. He commented at the March meeting that there were no threatened or endangered species in the immediate and surrounding areas of the forest.

More than anything, members of Friends of White's Woods want the public to understand how important the forest really is to the community, they said.

Stephanie Davis, Andy's wife, said White's Woods Nature Center was a deciding factor when her family settled in Indiana eight years ago. They visit the woods frequently with their children and are ecstatic to have the area available for recreation.

"It's an incredible resource for a town like Indiana to have," she said.

Neil Asting, of Edgewood Avenue, was also involved fighting the first plan 12 years ago. He comes to White's Woods about four times a week, he said, and would like to see the area treated like Cook Forest, famous for its old growth.

"I'm really disappointed to see this starting again," Asting said. "It's disgusting."

Ray Winstead, a biology professor at IUP, also doesn't want to see the plan implemented.

"Cutting is shortsighted and selfish," he said.

Larry Garner, White Township manager, said Tuesday night at the White Township Municipal building that supervisors would address any public concerns at tonight's 7:30 p.m. meeting at 950 Indian Springs Road.

Garner declined further comment until tonight's meeting, but expressed regret that the supervisors were unable to attend the hike after being invited by Andy Davis. Because of Pennsylvania's Sunshine Act, any prearranged gathering attended by a quorum of its members is considered a meeting and must be publicly advertised. Because the supervisors were invited Monday, he said, there wasn't time for that formality.