

# Supervisors OK White's Woods timbering plan

By JAN WOODARD  
FOR THE DISPATCH

INDIANA--Despite a thousand opposing signatures, the White Township supervisors voted Wednesday to approve a controversial plan for managing White's Woods Nature Center through selective timbering.

To the vocal dismay of about 50 people packed into the township board room, the supervisors voted unanimously in favor of the plan designed by forester Dave Babyak.

The vote came just two days after a lengthy meeting held for public comment drew an overflow crowd to the central area of the township's S & T Bank Arena. Many, wearing Friends of White's Woods (FWW) T-shirts, listed reasons they found the plan flawed.

On Wednesday, Supervisor Gail McCauley, who said she initiated commissioning the management plan, moved to accept it with the stipulation that it may be modified at the discretion of the supervisors.

Prior to the vote, Indiana resident Brian Cope, of FWW, read a resolution from the group proposing the supervisors reject Babyak's plan and form a commission of experts and FWW members to recommend a management plan that would treat the forest as a nature reserve and conservation area. The proposal also asked the supervisors to pass a motion opposing any future plans that may call for timbering of White's Woods unless recommended by the commission and approved by citizens of both Indiana Borough and White Township.

Susan Comfort and others held signs that read, "White's Woods is not a tree farm."

"I don't view this as tree farming, but as a way to save White's Woods," responded McCauley. "What will become of White's Woods if we don't take good care of it?"

Supervisor Gene Gemmell seconded McCauley's motion. He said he walked through the woods and found un-addressed problems: "I looked around and found it deplorable, all those (dead) trees from gypsy moths rotting, and to no use."

Gemmell said he also found Tree-of-Heaven, an invasive species, growing in the woods. "It will take over, if not treated properly," he said, adding "junk trees" such as aspen hinder the growth of oaks and other larger trees.

Gemmell also expressed concern over dead trees near hiking trails. Gemmell said he has heard from some members of FWW who said they don't walk the trails on windy days

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for fear of falling trees.

"Somebody's going to get hurt" if the supervisors take no action, Gemmell predicted.

One of the surprises of the night was when Supervisor George Lenz suggested the township 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.

Supervisor Robert Overdorff said, "He (Babyak) gave us a very good plan and we owe him our appreciation. But I am opposed to immediately implementing it."

Jerry Boucher, the remaining board member, said he agreed with Overdorff and supported the plan.

"We can't convince people this has never been a money issue. It's about the health of

the forest and nothing less," McCauley said. "If it was unhealthy in 1995, it would stand to reason that it didn't heal itself."

Comfort said she has read the management plan and claims it contradicts itself. She said the plan states that the various units of the forest are healthy. "So why timber a healthy forest? If you proceed, I beg you, get the advice of a conservationist."

At Monday's session, those who opposed timbering or altering White's Woods in any way was Mary Lou Maneke, who has walked in White's Woods two hours a day for the last 38 years. "It's why I'm healthy. It's beautiful. I love that place. Why do anything?" she asked.

"I'm a friend of White's Woods, too," said Babyak, a 28-year township resident. "It's not my intent to devastate White's Woods, as inferred."

Following the meeting, Babyak said he designed a

oppose timbering White's Woods," she said, asking the supervisors to work with FWW to manage the township property in a way that is satisfactory to the majority of residents.

Babyak said he was commissioned to design a plan for the long term health of the wooded section of White Township. He said the management plan is about more than timbering. It uses scientific methods to consider what is best for the trees, water, soil, historic sites, landscaping and the impact on surrounding areas, he said.

Susan Zimny, who said she will be teaching environmental psychology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, said what happens to the people who use the woods for recreation is equally important. "We need the woods for our mental and physical health," she said. "You calm down when you go to the woods."

Along the same line, Dave Yerger said the value of the woods is bigger than the commercial value of the land and trees. "There are ten thousand user hours, annually," he said. Communities compete for firms looking for natural amenities like Whites Woods, Yerger noted.

Babyak said there is a misconception about the number and size of trees that will be removed and reiterated that the purpose of the plan is to protect the woods, not to raise money through timbering.

He also addressed the question of erosion causing damage to homes below the woods in Indiana borough. Babyak said only .4 acres of timbered land directly above the borough would drain toward town, much less than the drainage that followed the development of the homes located beside the nature center.

"Cutting trees doesn't cause erosion. Bad roads causes erosion," he said

Calling it an intervention, Babyak said, "If implemented, in 10 years it won't look a whole lot different. There will be more timber volume then, than now."

Although the plan calls for cutting trees over a 10-year period, Babyak said it would actually involve only 16 weeks of timbering over the decade.

Bill Woods of Home said, Babyak worked on his wooded property in the 90s. "You're a good man for what you do, but that's not what's needed here," he said to Babyak.

Bill Paxon, a forester for 50 years who described himself as a naturalist-at-large, spoke on behalf of FWW. "It's a marvelous plan, but it's for a park," he said, noting White's Woods is a nature center and a forest, not a park with singular large trees.

With the plan under consideration, tree removal will result in "a terrible amount of secondary growth," he said.



JAN WOODARD/FOR THE DISPATCH

Susan Dahlheimer presented 1,000 petitions opposed to the timbering plan.

similar plan that was implemented by Indiana County for Pine Ridge Park near Blairsville, with no apparent damage to that site.

Susan Dahlheimer presented the supervisors with over a thousand signatures, plus 50 e-mails opposing the plan.

"The message is clear, we