

Public. Protect White's Woods

Supervisors hear 2 hours of outcry

By MARGARET HARPER
Gazette Staff Writer

White Township Supervisors listened to two hours of public outcry against a proposed forestry stewardship and management plan but took no action at a public hearing that addressed a decade-old debate.

The plan, drafted by local forester Dave Babyak, calls for the removal of 550,000 board-feet of trees from White's Woods Nature Center to protect and enhance the forest by fostering growth, according to Babyak.

But since the plan was revealed at a March meeting, area residents have protested through the group Friends of White's Woods, lobbying with petitions, hikes and letters. Supervisors set the date in May for Monday's meeting after residents packed the township building and expressed concern at recent monthly meetings.

Before the meeting, township Manager Larry Garner explained the rules, set a flexible three-minute limit for comment and asked people to try to not be repetitive. Chairman Robert Overdorff reminded the public that "character assassination" was unacceptable.

BABYAK FIRST spoke of the plan, which he said he took great care in developing by studying scientific data, the soil and landscape and how the plan could potentially affect surrounding properties.

One reason he believes so many people are protesting the plan is because of public misconceptions. He believes that people think in 10 years the forest will look bare. That, he said, isn't true, as his plan harvests 60 percent of the future growth, leaving 40 percent.

"In actuality, there would be more timber there in 10 years than there is now," Babyak said.

Another misconception, he said, was that because it is a 10-year plan that it means harvest will occur those entire 10 years. But the harvesting could actually be done in 16 weeks, he said. Soil erosion and water runoff have been other concerns voiced by residents near the property. Babyak explained that 0.4 acres of the 35 acres below the water source would be affected. He compared what would

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And, he said, bad roads are normally the cause of erosion, not cutting down trees.

He reminded the audience that he is a 28-year resident of White Township and said he cares for the land.

"It's not my intent to ruin or devastate White's Woods," Babyak said.

He also defended the supervisors' motive for the plan, saying that they asked for a plan to help the woods, not a "timbering plan."

"Tree removal is part of the plan," he said. "It's not just a timbering plan."

After Babyak finished, the crowd began making comments.

BILL PAXTON, a professional forester, said it "never would have entered his mind" to cut trees from land when it is used as a nature center for recreation.

"What you have is a park," Paxton said. "You fell one tree in that park, you have a mess. You drag one tree out, that is a bigger mess. ... People go to parks to see big trees, healthy trees."

Susan Dahlheimer said Friends of White's Woods members collected more than 1,000 signatures from people opposed to the plan.

Neil Asting presented the petitions to supervisors.

Ben Price, of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, said his office works with community groups and municipalities to draft local laws. The home rule charter, he said, demands constituents be given greater self-government options.

Price said he believes that democracy works when the people make the decision and suggested that the community determine the right choice, not the supervisors.

Larry Kruckman, who lives below White's Woods, told the story in economic terms.

He told people to imagine that a computer software firm wanted to come to the area and employ a great many of people. The firm would offer good wages and a reason for young people to stay in the area.

But when deciding whether or not to come, the CEO asks about available nature areas for recreation and hinges his decision on this factor.

Kruckman said that is already happening in Indiana County, and quoted a Pittsburgh Post-Gazette article in which Apangea CEO Louis Piconi said he



MARK DUSHOK/Gazette

WHITE TOWNSHIP supervisors took no action at a public hearing Monday on a proposed forestry stewardship and management plan for White's Woods Nature Center. From left are supervisors George Lenz and Gail McCauley and local forester Dave Babyak, who drafted the plan.

Dave Yerger, of Indiana, said that the price of lost revenue from one person leaving the area because of the lack of trails and recreation surpasses any profit made from selling the trees.

Michael Scott, of White Township, said the forest could take care of itself without tree removal and that the type of plan wasn't right for the intended use of the land.

"White's Woods is a nature center," he said.

"It needs a park management plan. Using the current plan would be irresponsible."

TOM SIMMONS, a biologist with Indiana University of Pennsylvania, said that while the plan does address other aspects that tree removal, it overrates timbering and underrates recreation.

That was the same sentiment as Robert Rittle, of Indiana, who said he has issues with the "passing reference" to the health of the forest in the plan. He said the supervisors owe it to themselves and the public to get a report from a nature preservationist.

Jessica Jopp, of Indiana, said she was struck by the number of references concerning the forest's health compared to economy and claimed to have counted 14 health references and 29 financial references.

Sean Howard addressed fire concerns and said that he thought the original intent of the plan was supposed to address fire safety.

Howard, who worked as a forest ranger, said that to reduce the fire hazard, smaller trees need removed, not larger ones.

Babyak replied that most of the large trees will remain untouched, unless damaged, rotten or suppressed.

Larry Turton passed out a letter and photos to supervisors and suggested that the supervisors "deed the land called White's Woods to the Indiana County Commissioners for the sole purpose of converting the area to a

unit of the Indiana County Parks and Trails."

Babyak spoke back and forth with audience member Bill Wood, who owns property near Home that Babyak cut for a timber sale in the early 1990s.

"You're a good man for what you do, but that's not what's needed at White's Woods," Wood said.

Norma Tarnoff, who said she protested the issue the first time it came around, questioned township Solicitor Michael Delaney about the laws that surround the use of the land. Before, a township code said that a majority vote by the public was needed to sell, lease or harvest a township forest. While that affected the issue years ago, the law has changed to allow the municipality to harvest the property as part of a management plan.

Susan Zimney spoke of the health benefits of walking in the forest. She said White's Woods "produces a community of people with a more positive outlook on life."

OTHERS SAID that to cut down trees just wouldn't be right. William Mallory, of Water Street, said he's walked in White's Woods for 37 years and doesn't want to see the plan enacted.

"It just doesn't make any sense to me," he said. "I love that place. I want to see it the way it is."

Mary Lou Manecke agreed. "I just love it the way it is," she said. "Why do we have to do anything to it?"

Applause after speakers was explosive from the more than 150 people in attendance.

While most spoke against the plan, others addressed different issues. Frank Moore, of White Township, said he feels sorry for the supervisors and amazed at the amount of criticism shown.

"I, in my heart, believe that whatever you do will be in the best interest of White's Woods," he said. "I admire you all for doing something for White's

Woods."

A representative from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources said it is a misconception about how drastic the plan is and said it can be done in a minimally destructive manner. And, he said, the trees are going to die anyway.

"Why can't we utilize what's going to be lost?" he asked, receiving groans from the audience.

"I think a lot of us are talking with our hearts instead of the intelligence we have."

Shirley Risinger, of White Township, said that no one seemed to protest when trees were cut down to build what is known as White's Woods Housing Development.

She said she was probably the only other person in the room besides supervisors and reporters who even heard Babyak's original presentation.

She said she is "amazed" by the distortion of the facts since then.

"If your objections were real, factual and unbiased, they would stand on their own merit," she said.

ALTHOUGH THE topic was heavy, the tone of the meeting was light, with Garner and speakers participating in some playful banter about time constrictions. Garner ushered the meeting to a close and said the next step is for supervisors to review the information.

"At some point, they will make a decision whether to accept the plan as is, accept the plan with revisions or reject the plan," Garner said. "It's totally up to the supervisors when that happens and how that happens."

Any action will be taken at a public meeting of the supervisors, and the issue is listed on Wednesday's agenda. Supervisors meet at 7:30 p.m. the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at the township building on Indiana Springs Road.

A copy of the plan is available at www.whitetownship.com.