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## One of These is a Preserve. The Other Isn't. A Fight Involving Both Revolves Around the Fate of the Fen

By Marni Pyke and Rupa Shenoy Daily Herald Staff Writers

Two competing visions for what's now a cornfield at the western end of Klein Road are causing discord among DuPage County leaders.

The forest preserve district wants to buy 200 acres near West Chicago adjacent to a fragile wetlands in the West Branch Forest Preserve known to some as the Klein fen. The district opened negotiations in March.

But the owners of the property now are asking the city of West Chicago to annex the land and zone it for houses - even though they say they have no immediate plans for development.

Earlier this month, forest President Dewey Pierotti wrote to West Chicago Mayor Michael Kwasman, saying he was disappointed the owners sought annexation because it could drive the price up and cause environmental harm.

"It's rated No. 1 on our acquisitions list," Pierotti said.

The site is rumored to be in the \$20 million range.

Pierotti has asked the city to hold back until the district can complete negotiations. Kwasman said he is waiting for the property owners and forest preserve to agree on the amount of land that needs to be preserved to protect the fen.

"We're not force-annexing. Somebody came to us and said 'We'd like to be in West Chicago,'" Kwasman said. "We would favor a combination of development and protection."

### Site's history

The land is owned by the Jemsek-Hinckley family, who also operate the nearby St. Andrew's Golf Club. Club President Jerry Hinckley said the family gathered the property over 30 years, and during that time the forest preserve had many opportunities to buy it.

"I am not going to sell my land for 25 percent of what it's worth," Hinckley said. "We didn't buy it to hold it for the forest preserve one day."

The annexation request originated in the 1990s when a neighboring property owner, who wanted to develop his land, asked the club to allow West Chicago to put infrastructure through the golf course.

In order to do so, St. Andrews had to be slowly annexed into West Chicago, with the last phase to be completed in 2011.

The club agreed, Hinckley said, and as an amendment to that arrangement, St. Andrew's recently filed a zoning request with West Chicago.

Annexed property is automatically zoned with minimum lot sizes of 40,000 square feet. But city

administrators are recommending allowing 9,000-square-foot lots.

Hinckley said there are no plans to sell the 200 acres. The golf course is keeping it as a "security blanket," he said. Route 59 may be widened, eating into the property, or the golf course itself may need to be expanded.

He said that since negotiations with the forest preserve began, at least seven developers approached the family with offers. Each one was turned down.

Still, "the forest preserve would like me to tell them in writing we will never do anything with property," he said. "I will never do that."

If a stalemate continues, the forest preserve can sue to take the property by eminent domain. Hinckley welcomed the opportunity to make his case.

Fen has friends

A fen is a unique set of wetlands, located in areas where ages ago, glaciers deposited layers of sand and gravel on top of an impermeable layer of ground, usually clay. As rain seeps through the sand and gravel, it picks up minerals, then travels sideways.

The mineralized water feeds the fen where the high alkaline content produces rare plants and flowers.

The West Branch preserve is home to unusual "hanging" fens, located along the valley slopes of the DuPage River.

The natural area is slowly being restored to its full potential with \$1.13 million in funding. Workers are removing old drainage tiles farmers used and eliminating invasive species. About 40 percent of the 200 acres in question drains into the West Branch Forest Preserve and into the fen, district natural resources staff calculated.

District experts say if the property is annexed and developed as homes with 9,000-square-foot lots, runoff from newly paved surfaces containing road salt, gasoline and lawn chemicals will hurt the fen's ecosystem as well as aquatic life in the river.

The West Branch preserve contains 553 plant and 231 wildlife species, including 10 that are threatened or endangered such as Henslow's sparrows. Among the animals and plants living there are ospreys, bobolinks, white wild indigo, compass plants and western meadowlarks.

"Fens represent a very small portion of the ecosystem," district Manager of Natural Resources Leslie Berns said.

Another concern is that if rainwater from the 200 acres is diverted into storm sewers, the fen will suffer.

"If there's not a certain amount of water, the plants there now will die off and invasive species will move in," forest preserve Commissioner Roger Kotecki said.

People living near the site are pushing to save the site from development, forming a Friends of Klein Fen group.

"We're certainly supporting the forest preserve in their quest to acquire it," said West Chicago resident Cary Dittmann, a member of the organization.

West Chicago will hold a public hearing on the issue on Aug. 7.

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