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District votes to buy Klein fen property

September 19, 2007

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WHEATON -- For the first time since the Forest Preserve District of DuPage County separated from the county's jurisdiction in 2002, the district will initiate condemnation proceedings.

It was a partial victory Tuesday for members of Friends of Klein Fen when Forest Preserve District commissioners voted 6-1 to acquire through negotiation or condemnation 100 acres of the 205-acre property on the west of Klein Road in West Chicago.

"Unfortunately, we could not reach an agreement about the price of the property," said President D. "Dewey" Pierotti Jr. of Addison.

The land was appraised at \$110,000 an acre, he said, and the district went above that in its offer.

"We went as far as we legally could go," Pierotti said.

The land currently belongs to St. Andrews Golf and Country Club in West Chicago, which is owned by Joe Jemsek and his family. The family has said they did not want to sell the property, but if they must, they want a fair price.

"The district knows our position and they've chosen not to match it," said the family's attorney, R. Terence Kalina, who is based in Wheaton.

The land is located across from the West Branch Forest Preserve. The district is looking to acquire the eastern half of the parcel to ensure the preservation of the Klein fen. Water flow from the St. Andrews property is vital to the fen's life, and the district's department of natural resources named it No. 1 for acquisition. Fens are rare, natural wetland communities formed by glaciers 18,000 years ago.

Members of the nonprofit Friends of Klein Fen have been urging the district to acquire the entire parcel.

"By cutting it back to one-half approximately, it would achieve our purpose of protecting the fen and maintaining our financial integrity," Pierotti said.

West Chicago resident Scott Rothenberg, a founding member of Friends of Klein Fen, said he is hopeful the remainder of the property will come back into the discussion.

"We'll sit tight and see what happens with the forest preserve and the owners," he said. "We'll also focus on Oct. 1."

That's when West Chicago's City Council considers the annexation and rezoning of the land to R-3 residential. Should the land be annexed and rezoned, it would increase the value of the parcel.

"I encourage the city of West Chicago to stay out of the way and let the parties negotiate in good faith," Rothenberg said.

Casting the opposing vote was Commissioner Joseph Cantore of Oakbrook Terrace. While he is in favor of the district acquiring the land, he said, he is opposed to condemnation.

"I just can't personally and philosophically support condemnation in this case," he said. "I told the voters in the last two elections what my stance was and they supported me. I have to live up to my word."

Commissioner Mike Formento of Glen Ellyn encouraged the family to come back to the

negotiating table.

"Even though this ordinance may be passed today, the door is still open for discussion," Formento said.

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