

Catholic youth camp drops plan to purchase Wilder Forest land



A path in Wilder Forest leads to Square Lake. A group of residents created the Square Lake Conservancy in 2023 to advocate for preservation of the natural resources at Square Lake and Wilder Forest. (Courtesy of Washington County)

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After working for more than a year to buy land and build a Catholic summer youth camp in northern Washington County, the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership has withdrawn its offer to purchase the 600-acre Wilder Forest.

“Our decision was in response to difficulty obtaining local approvals for the camp based on the ongoing misinformation campaign being conducted by a small number of vocal opponents,” Tim Healy, the partnership’s president, said in a statement Monday afternoon.

“This outcome is a shame — a true loss for the community, especially for those who want to see the Wilder property preserved and protected and, of course, for the kids,” he said. “Our hope was to have a place where young people, who are under tremendous mental stress, can get away from the noise of today’s world to better hear the quiet voice of God.”

Partnership officials gave notice of the cancellation of the purchase offer on Aug. 31, said Michelle Morehouse, vice president of advancement for the Wilder Foundation.

Wilder Foundation officials are reaching out to organizations that previously expressed interest in purchasing the land to see if they are still interested, Morehouse said Monday. If they do not hear back by Sept. 22, Wilder Foundation officials will retain a real estate broker and market the property, she said.

“We hope to have a buyer who has a conservancy mindset and hope to sell it for what it is valued,” Morehouse said.

Manitou Fund offer

One of the organizations that previously expressed interest in purchasing the land is the Manitou Fund, a White Bear Lake-based foundation that offered \$11 million for the Wilder Forest land last year. The Manitou Fund’s offer would have extended lease agreements with River Grove, known officially as Marine Area Community School, and Big River Farms, a land-based education program for immigrant and refugee organic farmers and farmers of color, run by The Food Group.

The Manitou Fund owns the adjacent former Warner Nature Center land, which also is in May Township.

The purchase offer by the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership meant that [River Grove charter school had to move](#) from the site. The [Manitou Fund purchased the Zephyr Theatre](#) building in downtown Stillwater for \$2.5 million in June for the school to use.

Manitou Fund officials said they were informed of the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership’s plan to cancel its offer on the land on Monday. They would not not immediately comment on any possible purchase of the land.

The Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership planned to build an overnight summer camp and winter retreat center on the Wilder Forest site, hosting up to 200 middle-school campers a week during the summer. The Youth Partnership planned to own and run the camp, but have Ohio-based Damascus Catholic Mission Campus employees lead adventure activities, songs and small groups.

Opposition to youth camp

The youth partnership’s plan was criticized by local conservationists who founded an organization, the Square Lake Conservancy, to fight the plan. The group, dedicated to preserving the natural resources at Square Lake and Wilder Forest, worked to raise awareness and build support for protecting the area, especially after the partnership released this summer a 12-page [fundraising brochure](#) detailing its push to raise \$16 million to purchase the land and create the new camp.

The brochure listed a dozen activities that the partnership claimed would be available to campers, including zip-lining, rope challenge courses and a vertical climbing wall. The second phase of the group's fundraising push, amount to be determined, called for the construction of a "majestic lodge that will house a new and improved cafeteria, chapel and coffee shop, and additional housing for campers and staff."

Former Minnesota Sen. Jane Krentz, DFL-May Township, a member of the Square Lake Conservancy, called the proposed youth camp "the wrong plan for this pristine location."

"It flies in the face of the key May Township comprehensive plan provision — the conservancy district — which was established for the purpose of providing for the preservation, protection and management of environmentally sensitive lands," she told the Pioneer Press in July.

Wilder Foundation officials shared the news with Square Lake Conservancy officials late Monday morning. "In keeping with Wilder's long-term plan to divest of the property, before initiating engagement of a real estate broker to conduct a wide spread marketing effort, I wanted to let you know I have reached out to the various members of May Township community who expressed an interest in purchasing the property in the past," Kelly Urista, director of facilities and property management for the Wilder Foundation, wrote in an email.

Jim Seidl, co-director of the Square Lake Conservancy, said he and other members of the organization were "over-the-moon happy and relieved" to hear the news.

"It's the right thing to do, and we'll now help find a way to protect that land forever," he said.

The group has offered to work with Wilder officials to find a "community-supported, conservation-centric, conservancy district-compliant solution — on an expedited basis," Seidl said.

Meanwhile, MCYP officials will continue to work on plans for a Catholic youth camp in a new location.

"We are still committed to seeing this dream become a reality," Healy said. "We will take what we learned over the last year, stay in contact with the many supporters who have joined our effort and refocus our attention on a new location. We appreciate the Wilder Foundation and the many, many people who have supported our work in May Township and who encouraged us to continue that work."



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Mary Divine is a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. She covers Washington County and the St. Croix River Valley, but has also spent time covering the state Capitol. She has won numerous journalism awards, including the Premack Award and the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists' Page One Award. Prior to joining the Pioneer Press in 1998, she worked for the Rochester, Minn., Post-Bulletin and at the St. Joseph, Mo., News-Press. Her work has also appeared in a number of magazines, including Mpls/St.Paul Magazine, Twin Cities Business Monthly and Minnesota Magazine. She is a graduate of Carleton College and lives in St. Paul with her husband, Greg Myers, and their three children, Henry, Frances and Fred.

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