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# Catholic youth camp's fundraising pitch alarms Wilder Forest advocates

“This is the wrong plan for this pristine location,” a former state senator said.



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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By **MARY DIVINE** | [mdivine@pioneerpress.com](mailto:mdivine@pioneerpress.com) | Pioneer Press  
July 30, 2023 at 4:49 a.m.

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A fundraising brochure produced on behalf of the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership details why the organization needs \$16 million to purchase and create a new camp on the 600-acre Wilder Forest property in northern Washington County.

It lists a dozen activities that will 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, calls 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."

The problem with the 12-page brochure, according to members of the Square Lake Conservancy, a group dedicated to the preservation of the natural resources at Square Lake and Wilder Forest, is that none of the proposed buildings or activities have been approved yet. "I was horrified when I saw it," said former Minnesota Sen. Jane Krentz, DFL-May Township. "They are fundraising like it's a done deal, but nothing has been approved yet."

Krentz and others formed the Conservancy group earlier this year to raise awareness and build support for protecting the area; Krentz lives on Square Lake in May Township.

The "preemptive fundraising" being done by the Youth Partnership for the development of a "mega-camp" on the Wilder site "before the sale of the land has even been finalized is misleading at best," Krentz said.

"To be raising money in our community and beyond on these misguided and factually incorrect assumptions is clearly wrong, and must be stopped," Krentz wrote in a letter to township officials earlier this month. "This is 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."



Jane Krentz (Courtesy photo)

The creation of the township's conservancy zoning district, which includes the Wilder Forest land, was done long before the Youth Partnership decided to buy the land, she said.

"In light of this blatant fundraising blitz based on developing a camp that clearly doesn't fit the use of the land as protected by the conservancy zone, I would appreciate hearing how the board was planning to respond to the plans described in the fundraising flier," Krentz wrote.

In a response posted on the township's website on Tuesday, township officials said they could not comment on the Youth Partnership's fundraising communications. The township, they wrote, will "seek to enforce its ordinances and policies in any manner that is permissible ... as with any property in the township."

No formal applications or requests related to a camp facility or any other new use at the Wilder



Some version of a camp is allowed on the property under the conditional-use permit issued to Wilder in 1991, he said.

“Is there a permit in place? Yes,” Pazlar said. “Does that permit have language in it that references a camp? Yes. But what we really need to find out is ... specifically what they plan to do, here’s the type of camp that they propose to operate, and then we go back to whatever permit is in place and say, ‘Yeah, it seems to fit, or it doesn’t,’ but we’re at a loss right now just because ... they’re still in the process of fully building out their future plans.”

## ‘The quiet voice of God’

The [Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership](#), based in Medina, plans to open an overnight summer camp and winter retreat center on the Wilder Forest site by next summer, hosting up to 200 middle-school campers a week during the summer. The Youth Partnership would own and run the camp, but Ohio-based Damascus Catholic Mission Campus would lead adventure activities, songs and small groups.

Fundraising efforts have put the partnership at a “comfortable spot right now, but we still have more to raise,” said Tim Healy, the partnership’s president.

The goal of the camp is to help young people “eliminate the noise of the outside world, including social media,” Healy said. “We want to help them hear the quiet voice of God in a place exactly like Wilder ... where they can see God in his creation.

We’re trying to help kids through a very difficult time. When you look at the mental-health crisis right now, these kids are facing unprecedented challenges. ... We’re trying to be a positive influence on these kids.”

MCYP officials are working with the township on plans for the property, and Healy said they hope to reach a resolution soon. “We believe we have a valid (conditional-use permit) that allows us to run a camp on the property, and we plan on working with the township on a pathway forward,” he said.

Township residents who have raised concerns about proposed camp activities should know that



The cover of a fundraising brochure for a future youth camp at the Wilder Forest land in northern Washington County. (Courtesy of the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership)



“The activities that we are going to do are going to be normal camp activities that are done in the hundreds of camps that are in Minnesota and Wisconsin,” he said. “We’re not proposing anything different. It’s just normal camp fun. Are kids going to have fun? Yeah, I hope so. We want to have a fun camp.”

The Youth Partnership is in the process of bidding out a new septic system for the property, he said. “We will have the best septic in the township – it will be the newest and the latest and the greatest,” he said.

## Concerns about impact

Statements like that concern Jim Seidl, co-director of the Square Lake Conservancy. “Based upon the pending purchaser’s public statements, their plan is to impact the Wilder Forest lands, waters and habitat with a major development project, constituting in a short period of time, the largest single construction project in May Township history,” Seidl said.

He and other members of the Square Lake Conservancy are hoping that the camp will be built at a different location.

Proactively preserving the “pristine beauty and ecological wonders of the 600-acre Wilder Forest and the unique 203-acre Square Lake in perpetuity is a once-in-a-lifetime choice,” Seidl said. “We support education and ecology in conservation districts – not recreation, which can easily be sited elsewhere. We support bees, birds and bears – not buses.”

Former Town Board Chairman Bill Voedisch has been a vocal critic of the camp’s plan. “These lands are not only pristine, they are pre-settlement,” he said. “They have not been touched. It’s like it was when Morgan May founded the township in 1893.”

The Youth Partnership camp would be the “biggest construction project this township has ever seen – bigger than any subdivision – with the busiest concentration of people the township has ever seen. These are 24-hour people. These are people who are going to have three meals a day; several trips to the bathroom for whatever and oh, by the way, a shower a day. Can you imagine the septic waste that this is going to produce? I can’t even comprehend it.”

The township is “rural by design,” Voedisch said. “That is why, to this very day, you can’t buy a gallon of gas, a quart of milk or a hamburger in May Township. We’re non-retail, we’re non-commercial, we’re non-industrial. That has been in town code for as long as I’ve lived out there, and this (plan) would turn it totally on its ear.”

The Wilder Forest land is home to 77 species of greatest conservation need – from turtles to dragonflies to plants, said Greg Seitz, founder, editor and publisher of St. Croix 360. “It is a priceless piece of land,” he said. “The lakes are unique and priceless and precious because they are extremely healthy and clean in an area where not many lakes are, and that’s because there is no development around them.”





Seitz, a resident of May Township, said he hopes officials from the Wilder Foundation, which has owned the land since 1958, will put conservancy easements on the land before they sell it.

“They have held onto it because of a stated interest and goal to make sure it is protected, and they wanted to make sure to sell it to a conservation-minded buyer,” Seitz said. “I don’t know if their potential buyer is truly conservation-minded or not, but I don’t think it really matters unless you have legal, permanent protections on it. They could sell it to anybody, and that person can turn around and do what they want within the zoning. If Wilder is really committed to protecting the land, they should put some legal protections in place before it changes hands.”

Officials with the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation said Wednesday that Wilder does not have plans to place conservation easements on the property prior to the sale. There is a valid purchase agreement in place for the property, but the closing date is yet to be determined, said Michelle Morehouse, vice president of advancement for the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

Pazlar, the town board chairman, said the township’s hands are tied until a plan is presented to the board.

“What they are proposing in the fundraising, that’s the least important thing,” Pazlar said. “What is most important, to any town board or city, is what are you actually applying to do? Until we have something concrete in front of us that says, ‘This is what we propose to start doing, and this is the activity that we want to do,’ I think that’s where the township’s focus should be – not on fundraising or theoretical or hypotheticals.”

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## Mary Divine **Mary Divine** | Washington County reporter

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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