

# StarTribune

[East Metro](#)

## Manitou Fund buys Wilder Foundation forest land near Stillwater

The undeveloped 600-acre property in May Township includes wetlands, lakes and critical habitat areas that will be preserved.

By [Matt McKinney](#) Star Tribune

October 3, 2023 — 3:56pm



Anthony Souffle, Star Tribune file

Students at River Grove, a charter school with an emphasis on environment and the arts, near Marine on St. Croix, pictured in 2017.

In a deal that protects hundreds of acres of pristine land in northern Washington County, the White Bear Lake-based charitable organization the Manitou Fund confirmed Tuesday that it has a purchase agreement to buy the 600-acre Wilder Forest.

The undeveloped land in May Township, near Stillwater, has been owned by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation since 1957 and includes woods, wetlands, lakes and critical wildlife habitat. It was most recently slated to become a Catholic youth camp before those [plans collapsed last month](#) in the face of local opposition.

"I am pleased and relieved that this property which has been earmarked for conservancy will now continue to be protected and preserved," said Greg McNeely, one of three McNeely children who serve as directors of the Manitou Fund.

The fund was created by Don McNeely, a Twin Cities business magnate who built a fortune running the family storage business. A past co-owner of the Minnesota Vikings, and one of the people responsible for bringing major league baseball to Minnesota, McNeely died in 2009. His family donated funds for the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory at Como Park, the Lee & Rose Warner Coliseum on the state fairgrounds, and for decades helped run the Warner Nature Center on May Township land that a McNeely family foundation bought from the Wilder Foundation in 1970.

"For over fifty plus years my dad committed support for this area," Greg McNeely said in a statement.

Oliver Din, the Manitou Fund's president and CEO, said in a statement that his group is looking forward to "continuing community based environmental focused programs which include education, agriculture, and research."

Terms of the sale were not disclosed. The Manitou Fund today already owns some 800 acres in northern Washington County, including 329 acres it bought from the Wilder Foundation in 2014.

### **Land use disputes**

The Manitou Fund [made a bid for the Wilder land](#) last year only to lose out to the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership. The partnership had searched for nearly three years for the perfect spot for their camp, and had hoped to open by 2024 to serve Catholic parishes in the Twin Cities metro and other faith-based groups. The camp could have served up to 500 kids a day during peak summer periods.

The Wilder Foundation signed a letter of intent in July 2022 to sell the land to the partnership. A few months later, May Township officials dropped the words "youth" and "camp" from allowed uses in the conservancy district that included the Wilder land, miring the project in a legal back-and-forth that saw township officials and an attorney for the partnership arguing over conditional use permits and township authority.

Local residents organized as the nonprofit Square Lake Conservancy presented a petition with 400 signatures to the May Township Board and raised \$74,000 to steer conversations about the future of the Wilder land. Last month, a spokesman for the youth partnership blasted opponents for running an "ongoing misinformation campaign" as the partnership announced it was abandoning its plans.

The Wilder Foundation said at the time that it would continue to search for a buyer; the organization has made it clear that selling the land will allow it to continue its work serving the needs of people in the St. Paul metro area.

The Wilder Forest sale to the Manitou Fund was welcomed by Jim Seidl of the Square Lake Conservancy, who said he holds the fund "in the highest regard."

"We commend and thank Manitou's leadership for their conservation-centric decision to acquire Wilder Forest," Seidl said. "We remain hopeful that Manitou will pursue a permanent conservation easement for all of the 600 acres, but at a minimum, the 55-acre parcel adjacent to Square Lake."

The land is zoned for conservancy by the May Township Board, and any future use would be required to meet township zoning requirements. Several efforts to put a permanent conservation easement on the land have failed over the years, most recently in 2021.

## **River Grove school**

The 600-acre parcel includes an 80-acre education campus that hosted Camp Wilder from 1980 to 2003, Concordia Language Villages from 2005 to 2015, and more recently the River Grove K-5 charter school. The land is also home to the 150-acre Big River Farms organic food farm, which has leased the spot from the Wilder Foundation.

The River Grove school was forced off of its campus this year after unsuccessful negotiations with Wilder and the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership to continue leasing the former Camp Wilder buildings. The school found a lifeline when the Manitou Fund announced this summer that it had [purchased an empty train depot](#) in downtown Stillwater and would renovate it as a temporary home for River Grove while working on a long-term plan for the school to relocate to May Township.

Construction continued on the former Zephyr train depot this week. Stillwater Community Development director Tim Gladhill said Tuesday that a significant amount of work remains on the building, which will be known as the Manitou Fund Education and Arts Center.

Founded in 2017 to serve families set adrift by the Stillwater School District's decision to close the Marine Elementary School, River Grove school's enrollment was around 225 students with 70 on its waiting list last year. Its enrollment has fallen to 133 students today, according to school records.

River Grove school executive director Drew Goodson was not immediately available Tuesday for comment. Notes from the Sept. 14 River Grove board meeting said construction on its temporary site in downtown Stillwater would wrap up this fall.

**Matt McKinney** is a reporter on the Star Tribune's state team. In 15 years at the Star Tribune, he has covered business, agriculture and crime.

[mckinney@startribune.com](mailto:mckinney@startribune.com) 612-673-7329 [\\_mattmckinney](#)