

# Square Lake Conservancy propose future vision for Wilder-Manitou Property

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An hour before the September May Township Board meeting, the town hall was packed to overflowing with residents, representatives of the Square Lake Conservancy, and people associated with River Grove school.

They had come to talk to the Board of Supervisors and town staff about their vision for the Wilder property, which did not include its sale to the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership (MCYP) for use as a youth camp.

Throughout the group's presentation, people continued to pack into the already overflowing town hall. Latecomers expected to talk about the youth camp, but to do so at the official Board of Supervisors meeting.

There was no notice of the meeting on the township website, and at the time of the meeting, no notice on the bulletin board outside the building. According to a lawyer from the League of Minnesota Cities, municipalities are only required to provide notice of special meetings by posting outside the municipal building four days before the meeting.

When asked how they had known to come to the meeting, some attendees in the main room said they had received a phone call.

Supervisor John Pazlar said the Square Lake Conservancy requested a meeting after they found out that a supervisor and staff had met, in a public meeting, with the prospective buyers of the Wilder property to answer questions about the process of getting a permit.

### **A conservation focus**

The Square Lake Conservancy goals for a workshop with the board were quite different. They wanted to provide a conservation-focused vision for three properties they do not own and were not buying – at least at that time. Their vision encompassed the Wilder property, the Manitou Foundation property and the Scientific Research Station.

They told the Board that their goal was to:

- Assist Wilder in selling its land at a fair market value to a conservation-centric, community-supported buyer.

- Provide a long-term home for the River Grove School and Big River Farms

- Establish a permanent conservation easement over 55 acres of land on the north side of Square Lake (Wilder-owned property)

- Protect Mays Lake, Clear Lake, Terrapin Lake, and East Boot Lake with a buffer zone, and 2,400 acres of land between and around those lakes as a wildlife corridor.

- Unite the community and provide a long-term community asset.

Their presentation to the Board described the 2,400

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acres of conservancy district-zoned land as an oasis for wild animal and plant life. Sixteen years ago, citizen scientists had catalogued over 1,300 species of plants, animals, and fungus in the area. Seventy "species of concern" reside there. (A species of concern is a plant or animal for which there is concern about its ability to remain in the landscape for a long time.)

## Protecting lakes

The Square Lake Conservancy said that many lakes in Washington County are "at risk" due to shoreline development and high-impact recreation.

Square Lake, which adjoins the Wilder property, scores an A for water quality and clarity and has some of the most intensive use of all the lakes in the area. A small decline in water clarity in that lake was found to be the result of stocking the lake with trout, not recreational use, according to a Carnelian-Marine-St. Croix Watershed District article.

The Square Lake Conservancy identified Terrapin Lake, Clear Lake, and Mays Lake as particularly vulnerable to degradation because they are small and shallow. The group recommended no new development, vegetation clearing, trail making, sand blankets, grading, or other similar impacts within the undeveloped natural areas surrounding these lakes. They noted that previous low-impact use, such as dock fishing, canoeing, nature study, and use of a solar-powered pontoon boat had not degraded them.

## Future development

In the group's opinion, the only areas where development or activities would be appropriate are the site of the former River Grove School, the site of the former Warner Nature Center, and the entry to River Grove and Big River Farm. They believe all other areas should be protected habitat or farmland.

## River Grove School

The presentation to the Board highlighted the educational programming River Grove School had provided to the community,

as well as over \$400,000 in taxpayer funds invested in maintenance and improvements of the school campus. They contended that without a community school, which operated in the Wilder Forest for 5-6 years, the 130-year-old township would lose its nucleus and risk "fading away."

## The proposed youth camp

Angie Hong, a school board member for River Grove, said that the community had been pulled apart by the proposed sale of Wilder Forest to the MCYP. The group's PowerPoint presentation quoted a former township supervisor saying he considered the Catholic youth camp to be the biggest threat the township had ever faced. No context was provided for that statement.

The Square Lake Conservancy's attorney, Tim Kelly, said it was hard to comment on the proposed youth camp because they hadn't provided a detailed plan, a 5-year plan, or a master plan. He said these would be needed for the township to evaluate the environmental impacts of the camp, or the need for permits.

He noted that MCYP had not received a Conditional Use permit from the township to operate an overnight camp and the proposed camp did not meet ordinance requirements for the conservancy district.

MCYP had not yet asked for a CUP modification. The existing CUP allowed for overnight campers, but not in the numbers that had previously been presented by MCYP at public meetings.

The group's spokesman, Mark Diessar, said they had no knowledge that the township's staff was working on a matrix to respond to a query from MCYP. Township attorney Dave Snyder said "If you take the position that a conditional use permit is a property interest that travels with the property and would be acquired by any buyer... then what is it they can do with their permit? The Applicant is asking what is it that you say we can do."

The town planner had been putting together a matrix to present to the purchasers outlining the township position on the existing CUP. Attorney Snyder clarified that once the matrix was created,

it would not be up to staff to say, "You can do this." That decision lay with the board.

"Then came the request from the Square Lake Conservancy framed as 'We would like input into the matrix,'" said Snyder. "That came in mid-month so there was no way to finalize the matrix and allow that input to happen." The matrix was not completed.

## Reconsidering the Conservancy District in Township Code

Supervisor Pazlar said it hadn't been announced yet but there was apparent interest in reworking the conservancy district definition adopted last year. "There was quite a bit of work done on the conservancy zone language, but it just didn't get the eyeballs it should have," he said. "I'd be very interested in supporting taking a fresh look at that from this group. Followed up by another public meeting."

When asked if that meant another moratorium, Pazlar said it probably did not, that the moratorium had been enacted because there were a lot of intertwining documents that needed to be reviewed together: the comp plan, zoning codes, and ordinances.

"I think the condition it's in now is pretty good... I think if groups like this have the benefit of a month or two to look at it, we could have a productive discussion about parts in there that might still be [a problem]."

## Wilder buyer withdraws purchase offer

Just after the Sept. 7 meeting, the Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership announced it was withdrawing its purchase offer. While there may be no overnight youth camp at Wilder Forest, it appears there will be ample opportunity for the local community to have a say on the direction of conservation in May Township.

While the Square Lake Conservancy presented a vision for one specific area, there are other properties with conservancy district zoning in May Township, such as the Arcola Mills site. Whatever changes are made would likely have an impact on all properties.