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Temporary tents for laborers, children playing near clubhouse as crops are harvested spur objections

Responding to concerns from a handful of residents, Town of Belgium officials said the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust is not violating local ordinances by allowing people working at its Forest Beach Migratory Preserve to live on the property temporarily.

“If they’re not selling from the property and they’re just letting them live in the clubhouse and use the sheds, I don’t see a problem,” Town Zoning Administrator Charlie Parks said during a Aug. 17 Plan Commission meeting.

Commission member Catherine Urness said she dissuaded a small group of town residents who live near the former golf course property on Forest Beach Lane from launching a petition drive aimed at preventing people from staying overnight at the preserve. Among those people are Hmong farmers who harvest vegetables at the nearby Afterglow Farm and occasionally sleep in the clubhouse and Wisconsin Conservation Corps members who camp on the property.

Urness said residents were upset because they thought the tents were an eyesore and devalued their properties.

But commission member Al Poull said the real concern is for the safety of the Hmong children living at the preserve.

“If they’re concerned about anything, it should be about the little guys,” said Poull, who lives in the area, referring to the farmers’ children.

The situation is dangerous because several children run around the clubhouse while their parents work in the fields, Urness said.

“Somebody is going to get killed,” she said. “They’re going to get hit by a car. They were even tearing around in golf carts.”

The families, who live in South Milwaukee, stay in the clubhouse on nights they harvest vegetables, said Shawn Graff, executive director of the Land Trust.

The farmers belong to the Fondy Market project, which aims to find markets for small farmers and provide fresh fruit and vegetables for inner city residents.

Some questioned if the Land Trust was operating a business.

“We’re carrying out our mission. We’re not generating a profit. Part of our mission is supporting working lands,” Graff said.

The clubhouse is used by interns who live at the site and maintain the property and occasionally

by the farmers, Graff said. The tents are for Wisconsin Conservation Corps members who are cutting trails and doing other work at the preserve.

Graff said there has been a history of people living in the clubhouse, noting the St. Peter family lived there when they owned the golf course and Bruce Bloemmer, Squires owner who sold the property to the Land Trust, said his daughters sometimes stayed there in the summer.

While several commission members agreed the Land Trust is not violating town rules, they said the way the clubhouse is being used supports their argument that the Land Trust should continue paying property taxes.

The Land Trust has appealed the Town Board's decision not to grant a tax exemption for the nonprofit organization.

A hearing is scheduled for 2:30 p.m. Monday, Sept. 19, in Ozaukee County Circuit Court.