

Deal with Port keeps nature preserve plan alive

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
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<http://www.ozaukeeexpress.com/images/052313/mapSM.png> **City, conservation groups reach accord that would protect 150 acres and allow for development, but much work remains**

A coalition of conservation groups and the City of Port Washington have reached an agreement that keeps alive the possibility of protecting most of the Lake Michigan bluff land once owned by VK Development in an Ozaukee County nature preserve.

A week of intense negotiations sparked by the city's opposition to a proposed nature preserve on 210 acres — most of which the city annexed for development — wrapped up Friday with a deal that could protect a nearly one-mile stretch of undeveloped shoreline and the land around it while still allowing for residential development on the city's far south side, Ozaukee Washington Land Trust Executive Director Shawn Graff said.

"These were not easy negotiations, but we respected the city's perspective and in the end, as was said at Friday's meeting, this is a win for everyone," Graff said. "This allows us to move forward."



According to the agreement, the Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy and the Ozaukee County Planning and Parks Department can attempt to purchase and preserve roughly 150 acres between Highway C and the lake from the Cedar Heights Gorge to south of Stonecroft without objection from the city.

"At 150 acres, this is still a very significant project, and it keeps The Nature Conservancy on board," said Graff, who noted last week that the Conservancy, a national environmental group that has protected more than 100 million acres throughout the world, would lose interest in the project if the proposed preserve became too small.

In return, about 30 acres between Highway C and the lake north of the gorge will remain available for development, as will about 70 acres west of Highway C to the north and south of Stonecroft Drive, City Administrator Mark Grams said.

The city, whose objections to the initial conservation proposal threatened to erode county support for the preservation effort, is now a willing partner in the effort, Mayor Tom Mlada said.

"I want us as a city to be known for welcoming the right opportunities, and this is a profoundly

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unique opportunity to preserve lakefront land and make it available to both area residents and visitors,” he said, noting that the agreement also meets the city’s goal of residential growth to the south.

“I walked away from that negotiating table being very proud of the role the city played.”

Not all city officials are as enthusiastic.

“I would have liked to see more land reserved for development, but this all could very easily be moot,” Grams said, referring to the fact the conservation groups have yet to negotiate with Waukesha State Bank, which acquired the property through foreclosure.

The bank is listing 206 acres of former VK land for \$18 million and marketing it as a rare development opportunity.

“The bank is not going to get \$18 million, but I know developers have made what I thought were very fair offers and they were rejected,” Grams said. “The question is, how low is the bank willing to go?”

Graff said the Land Trust and The Nature Conservancy plan to meet with bank officials as soon as possible to start negotiations.

“We’ve changed the parcel a bit, so the question is, is the bank willing to sell us 150 acres and at what price?” Graff said.

The city can do its part, Mlada said, by informing the bank it supports a 150 acre nature preserve with developable land to the north and west.

“The bank is a huge player and it’s critical that we contact the right people at the bank and let them know we support this and ask them to please not dismiss the (conservation) groups,” he said.

The most likely financing scenario is that The Nature Conservancy would purchase the land and hold it while it and the Land Trust works to secure grants and donations to cover the cost of acquisition.

Ultimately, the county, whose Parks and Open Spaces Plan call for the land to be preserved, would assume ownership of the property and maintain it as a public nature preserve.

The county’s Natural Resources Board, which oversees the Planning and Parks Department, recommended the county borrow \$600,000 in a bonding package to be approved June 5 to help pay for the land, but whether that money is part of the proposed borrowing package is unclear.

The County Board voted 15-7 last week in favor of a motion to borrow for the land acquisition, but it was assumed at the time that the motion failed because a super majority of 20 supervisors was needed to include the contribution in the proposed bonding project. Officials now say that

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may not be the case and that the motion passed.

“We’re reviewing it right now,” County Administrator Tom Meaux said Monday.

But, Meaux said, the county might not include the land acquisition contribution in the bonding package regardless of the vote because of concerns being expressed by the county’s bonding advisors, who point out that there is no tangible indication at this time the project will proceed.

“The issue is we don’t even have an accepted offer on the property yet,” Meaux said.

If the county does not include the \$600,000 contribution in the bonding package, that doesn’t mean it won’t support the preservation project financially, Meaux said.

“We have other options outside of bonding,” he said, adding that the county could borrow the money from a local bank or through the Wisconsin’s State Trust Fund Loan Program.

Graff said having county financial support sooner rather than later is important.

“People might think a \$600,000 contribution from the county for a multi-million piece of property is a drop in the bucket, but it’s very important to the partners involved in this and the fundraising effort,” he said. “It would show that the county has skin in the game, and that would be very meaningful for fundraising.”

Supr. Jennifer Rothstein of Mequon, a member of the Natural Resources Committee, said it’s important the county support the project with a financial contribution.

“As thrifty as we are, we recognize a great value when we see one, and this would be of incredible value to the county and City of Port Washington. It has huge potential,” she said. “Thirty years from now, out of all the projects we are bonding for, this is the only one that will still be relevant.”

Rothstein praised city leaders for working with the Land Trust, The Nature Conservancy and county officials to reach a land-use agreement.

“I really applaud the city,” she said. “It takes some real foresight to say, ‘This isn’t what we annexed the land for but we now recognize what an amazing opportunity this is.’”

Just how important an agreement with the city is in terms of county support for the project was evident at last week’s County Board meeting.

“The biggest problem that people have is taking this property from the city’s tax rolls and putting it into parks,” County Board Chairman Lee Schlenvogt said two days before the agreement with the city was reached. “The problem I have is, we don’t have clear cut answers from the city on what is developable.”

Mlada said he wants the city to be an active supporter of the project.

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“We’re excited about lending our support to this effort to help sell it to the county,” he said. “This is just too good of an opportunity not to move forward with.”