

County approves reduced grant wish for Meinert Park

BY GREG MEANS
Beacon Editor

Muskegon County Commissioners see the value of expanding Meinert County Park by nearly doubling its acreage with Lake Michigan back dune land, but aren't convinced the property is worth its appraised value.

That's why some commissioners were hesitant about approving a grant application to fund a portion of the property purchase. However, they did at a lower requested amount.

The commissioners were faced with the issue of applying for a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant to expand the park located in White River Township following a public hearing the commission held at its meeting last Tuesday.

Robert Scolnik, district 11 commissioner, said he felt trapped on the issue even though he offered a hesitant support on the motion to seek a \$273,000 state grant.

"I don't see an option on voting for this. I feel caught in a corner on the price," Scolnik said if he voted no he would be seen as not wanting to enhance the public's

access to beautiful duneland, but if he voted yes, he would have been viewed as fiscally irresponsible.

Ken Mahoney, District-1 commissioner in whose district the land and park is located, agreed with some of the commissioners that the initial appraised value of the land is too high, but he said the grant application does not commit the county to that price.

John Warner, deputy director of the Muskegon County Public Works, presented the grant request to the commissioners.

The county, now that it has approved the application, will be in competition for funding with other projects around the state. Trust Fund monies come from oil and gas minerals rights paid to the state.

The property in question includes 91 acres of critical dunes, woodlands, marshes and ponds which are divided in ownership by the 45-acre Dan Dekker Trust and the 46-acre Rottman Trust.

It is located contiguous to the current 88-acre Meinert County Park which includes dunes, a Lake Michigan beach, playground, picnic area and campground.

Warner said the proposed addition to the

park would be suitable for nature trails.

The initial resolution presented to the county commissioners called for a \$475,000 request for a Trust Fund grant that would be matched by a \$475,000 federal Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program grant for which the Trust for Public Land (TPL) has already applied. TPL is a national non-profit organization dedicated to land conservation.

However, Warner told the commissioners the total estimated value of the property has been reduced to \$808,000 because certain pieces of property are no longer included in the offer.

Several commissioners, including Chuck Buzzell, I. John Snider II and Don Aley believe that is too high a price.

"I really have a problem with the \$9,000 an acre (appraisal)," Buzzell, who represents District 2, said. "I'm not sure the property is worth that. If this is our final shot at it, I'm not sure I can support it."

Buzzell asked Warner if the commission would later be able to negotiate a lower purchase price for the property.

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Warner said the state requires two appraisals of the property, and only one has been submitted.

Holly Hughes, White River Township trustee who was at the public hearing because the park is located within the township, said the county would negotiate the final purchase price after it receives notice that the grant is approved. "You passing this proposal today does not commit you to a price on the property. I think you have an opportunity that doesn't come around often," she added.

White River Township, Hughes said, is currently working with the state on another Natural Resources Trust Fund project. In 2006 the state approved a nearly \$500,000 Natural Trust Fund grant for the purchase of 2.2 acres to add to the township's Barrier Dunes Sanctuary on Lake Michigan, but the township is still negotiating for the purchase price. Hughes told the commissioners the township has until this October to come up with the final price.

Hughes suggested the county reduce the amount it is requesting for the grant to a level it feels comfortable with rather than not applying since the grant process can be lengthy.

Aley, who during the public hearing, said he would like to see the land become a public domain, but would be a no vote because he said the land was "grossly overpriced," believed that by applying for a grant at a certain value it would give the landowners an advantage in negotiations knowing that amount was approved.

Aley, believing the land value is closer to \$6,000 an acre, moved to amend Commissioner Marvin Engle's motion to apply for the grant, to reduce the amount requested from \$404,000 to \$273,000. Aley said he could support the \$273,000 grant request as long as the county has the option to later negotiate the purchase price.

Aley's amendment was passed 10-0 with Commissioner Roger Wade absent. The amended motion was then passed 9-0. Commissioner Bill Gill abstained from voting.