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DeKalb County Government
Sycamore, Illinois

**Forest Preserve District Committee Minutes
July 25, 2017**

The DeKalb County Forest Preserve District Committee met Tuesday July 25, 2017 at 6:00 pm at Afton Forest Preserve Shelter. In attendance were committee members: Mr. Brown, Ms. Little, Mr. Roman, Ms. Haji-Sheikh, Mr. Bagby, Superintendent Hannan and District Naturalist Al Roloff. Mr. Porterfield was absent and Mr. Hughes arrived after adjournment. Guests included Mary Kay Knudsen.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Mr. Brown called for a motion to approve the May 25, 2017 minutes. Ms. Little moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Mr. Roman and the motion passed unanimously.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Mr. Brown noted the Executive Session would be removed from tonight's meeting. He then called for a motion to approve the amended agenda. Ms. Haji-Sheikh moved to approve the agenda, seconded by Mr. Roman and the motion passed unanimously.

MONTHLY REPORTS

Mr. Hannan began by noting that despite the Executive Session being removed, discussions regarding land donation being considered are moving forward. However they will not need to be discussed this evening.

Mr. Hannan then reported that in the Monthly Reports, there is information regarding the Illinois Clean Energy Foundation Grant press release regarding their partnership with the District. The report also contains recent photos from Prairie Oaks Preserve. Mr. Roloff noted that the picture of the culvert there is no longer current as recent rains caused flooding over 2 bridge culverts. Staff is looking at options for flood prevention damage going forward.

Mr. Hannan noted that Mr. Roloff will be giving a tour of the Afton Prairie after tonight's meeting. He then noted there were photos of Paul Sorenson, the District's "restoration inspiration" for their prairie restoration efforts. Mr. Sorenson recently hosted a Volunteer Land Steward's picnic at his 1908 cabin on the Rock River south of Oregon Illinois. He cooked for the group and led tours of his prairie, woodland and river areas. Mr. Hannan commented that the District tries to plan activities through the year to thank the Volunteer Land Steward's for their work.

Mr. Hannan then noted that Justine Luepkes, park manager at MacQueen Preserve forwarded some very impressive night sky photos taken by scouts camping at MacQueen. Ms. Haji-Sheikh asked if there were any planned activities tied to either the upcoming meteor showers or the total eclipse. Mr. Hannan noted that while he knew of no specific event scheduled, the Northwest Astronomers so regularly utilize the Afton and Potawatomi Woods Preserves and for their 2 public star parties (see monthly report). Ms. Haji-Sheikh then went on to note that the upcoming meteor show will be the first of its kind in 95 years. Mr. Hannan commented that many are saying that the best place to see the eclipse will be in Southern Illinois. Ms. Haji-Sheikh noted that she has reserved a spot in Vienna, IL for just that reason.

Mr. Hannan then showed photos take at the recent annual Tour de Farms MS fundraiser bike ride event. The organization that coordinates the event sent a letter of thanks to the District for the use of the Preserves for rest stops on the ride.

He then shared photos of the progress on the new Sycamore Forest Preserve. Mr. Roman noted that the transfer of the Sycamore Preserve to the Forest Preserve District would be on the August agenda of the Planning and Zoning Committee and forwarded to the August County Board Agenda for vote. Mr. Hannan added this will allow the Forest Preserve District to have liability and property insurance on the new Sycamore Forest Preserve.

Mr. Hannan then reported that local resident Ron Klein and the Historical Society held a picnic at Merritt Prairie Preserve Piece Town Hall. The Pierce Town Hall has been moved there and Mr. Klein had wrote about that three generations of his family had voted at the Pierce Town Hall (see July monthly report) .

Ms. Doty shared information on a new pollinator box built as an Eagle Scout project as well as the Mother's Day wildflower walk held at the Russell Preserve.

Mr. Hannan commented that the Knute Olson Preserve and other preserves along the Kishwaukee River have also been very well used this year by kayakers and canoeists. He also noted that the Afton Wetland Bank Water Control Structure repairs have been approved and a notice will be posted explaining what work will be done. Local resident and photographer Chuck Christianson also sent some beautiful photos of birds at Afton and Prairie Oaks. There is also a research project being done by a University of Illinois /Chicago student, Megan who is studying the effect of bird population with respect to controlling insect populations near farm fields.

Mr. Hannan then noted that Mr. Roloff's report on Natural Resource Management activities at the Preserves was also included in their packets as well as the shelter house and camping permit information.

Mr. Hannan commented that the FY 2018 budget review process would be starting soon and the first draft of the budget will be brought to the Committee next month.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS

Ms. Haji-Sheikh commented again on the upcoming meteor shower on 8-21-17. She noted that she had read a recent blog discussing this and noted there will not be another like it for 96 years.

Mr. Brown commented that he had been speaking with the U of I student Megan and she expressed an interest in wildlife preservation activities. He then referred her to Oaken Acres.

Mr. Hannan then showed a pleasant note from a recent shelter house user thanking the preserve staff for their shelter house outing and noting that they will absolutely be coming back next year.

Mr. Bagby commented that while he was recently in Columbus OH, he saw some signage materials that might be helpful for use in the preserves. He will pass the information to Mr. Hannan.

Mr. Hannan then turned the meeting to Mr. Roloff for his Afton Tour.

AFTON TOUR

Mr. Roloff opened by noting that every group that comes to the Afton Preserve asks how many trees are on the preserve's 335 acres. While there is no official count, he did comment that when the first homesteaders arrived, there was not a single tree in the township. In the 1850's a local residents' diary noted that the only tree between DeKalb and Waterman was located on their farm. Mr. Roloff noted that he was actually able to identify and locate the tree and it was a Hawthorn.

Though the area had no trees, it was covered with prairie. An 1841 Plat Map shows there were some small waterways to the north and south, but not the waterways that exist today. The McGirr family who first settled the farm here at Afton chose the spot due to the slopes in the land. Sloped land would be dryer than flat lands. The desire for dryer land led many farm to install drain tiles to remove surface water. At Afton, some of the tiles have been broken and berms built to recreate wetlands.

Mr. Roloff observed that the mission of the Forest Preserve District is to bring the Preserve lands back to their natural state and condition. This mission opens the door to prairie restoration as well as forest and wetland restoration and preservation. Mr. Roloff noted that historically natural woodlands tend to run alongside the east side waterways as the water would stop or buffer fires that occurred from long ago prairie fires and prevailing west winds.

Mr. Roloff then noted that the previously mentioned Paul Sorenson (the District's restoration inspiration) began his work in the 1980's. He taught that prairies are not just grasslands. There are many types of natural prairies such as marshes, sedge meadows, wet prairies (with water a foot or so below the surface mesic prairies (with water more than a foot below the surface).

Afton was for many years an active farm. But by the 1970's much of the top soil had been eroded and worn away. The District purchased the initial parcel for approximately \$900 an acre in 1973. The original homesteaders, the McGirr's, had moved on by that time. There were no trees, prairie or wetlands at Afton in 1973. The first restoration work on the land was to bring in trees purchased by the Department of Conservation. These trees were primarily 6 inch seedlings. The staff would plant an acre or two at a time into future picnic areas and habitat areas.

The Afton house, barns and water tower were built in 1902, the original barns burned in 1930, but was rebuilt as a dairy barn. That structure is now the maintenance building.

Mr. Hannan recounted that Kenny McGirr had many interesting stories about the land. One was that a McGirr daughter is buried on the property somewhere. The homestead's original barn held Belgium workhorses. One of the horses inadvertently killed Kenny's brother with a kick that just missed Kenny.

Kenny also found many arrowheads on the property and also the buttons from the uniforms of German POW's who worked the fields during WWII.

At the opening of the Preserve, a large McGirr bell that had been on the original farm was retained. The old Afton old schoolhouse was torn down but some of the lumber is part of the Afton barn.

Mr. Hannan noted that the name Afton came from a river in Ireland, the homeland of many of the Afton township immigrants.

Mr. Hannan noted that in 1979, the land had 4 bison living on the northwest corner of the park. District staff built a fence to contain them made from old railroad ties from the Great Western Trail. A local resident, Howard Andres had donated a bull buffalo to the District and then they purchased 3 heifers from a FFA project student in Huntley. All was going well until the winter of 1979 when the snow created an escape route over the fence. On St. Patrick's Day in 1979, they even made it all the way to Hinckley. After rounding them up, they took them to a farm on Rimsnider Road and put them into the owner's empty cattle yard. When Mr. Hannan attempted to explain to the owner why they had to use his pen. Unfortunately, the owner was extremely hard of hearing and could not understand him. After some difficulty and the appropriation of a note pad to assist with the communications, they came to an agreement to hold them there for a short time. After some consideration, the District decided the buffalo had to go. But when the returned to the farm, the owner noted that he rather liked having them as it encouraged visitors to see the wandering bison and he hadn't had many visitors for years.

Mr. Hannan noted that he often referred to 1979 as the District's "Bison"-ennial year.

However, the bison were eventually sold. Bison are currently located at Fermi Laboratory and the Nachusa Grasslands south of Oregon Illinois. Both have thriving herds.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Mr. Brown called for any public comments. Hearing none he moved to adjournment.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Bagby moved to adjourn, seconded by Ms. Haji-Sheikh. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Brown, Chairperson
Forest Preserve District Committee
BB:kjr