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DeKalb County Government  
Sycamore, Illinois

**Forest Preserve District Committee Minutes  
March 28, 2017**

The DeKalb County Forest Preserve District Committee met Tuesday March 28, 2017 at 6:00 pm in the Freedom Room of the Legislative Center. In attendance were committee members: Mr. Brown, Ms. Little, Mr. Roman, Mr. Porterfield, Mr. Bagby and Superintendent Hannan. Ms. Haji-Sheikh was absent. Guests included Ryan Hannan, Peggy Doty, Director of the Natural Resources Education Center (NREC) and Cindy Capek representative for Active Transportation/Live Healthy.

**APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Mr. called for a motion to approve the minutes of the February 28, 2017 meeting. Mr. Bagby moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Ms. Little and the motion passed unanimously.

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

Mr. Brown called for a motion to approve the agenda. Ms. Little moved to approve the agenda, seconded by Mr. Porterfield and the motion passed unanimously.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Mr. Brown opened by asking if there were any public comments. He then noted that Ms. Capek would be speaking at another point in the evening. Hearing no others, he moved to the next item on the agenda.

**FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT TRAVEL POLICY**

Mr. Hannan began by noting that this policy mirrors the overall County travel policy. However, there is a need to establish a specific version for the Forest preserve District. He commented that the County version was passed last month. Mr. Brown asked if there was any discussion. Hearing none, he called for a motion to advance the policy to the full County Board.

Mr. Porterfield moved to advance the Travel Policy, seconded by Mr. Roman and the motion passed unanimously.

**MONTHLY REPORTS**

Mr. Hannan began by noting that they have been able to perform prairie burns far earlier than in previous years thanks to the good weather in February. He commented that the district posts a good deal of information for the public on the purpose and practices of the burns.

He then added that the old railroad right of way is being prepared now as a connection for the Sycamore Forest Preserve. He pointed out there was also a photo in the packet of the right of way approved for the Somonauk to Sannauk trail.

Another recently approved connection is the trail right of way given by the Stone Prairie apartments to connect the Sycamore Forest Preserve to the Great Western Trail.

Mr. Hannan then noted that the monthly Preserve use reports are included in the packet as well as a copy of a recent article written by local Master Naturalist and Master Gardener Ron Peabody.

On April 8, Sycamore St. Mary's will again hold their annual "Russell Hustle" 5K run/walk fundraiser at Russell Woods.

Mr. Hannan also noted that Norm Schafer of the DeKalb Kiwanis had sent him a 1931 article on the original establishment of the DeKalb Forest Preserve District (copy attached to minutes).

He then noted that he had been approached by a USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) wildlife biologist on a wildlife relocation project they are doing. There had been a recent project that relocated Red Tailed Hawks away from Midway and O'Hare Airports. These hawks were marked with an orange patch on the shoulders. Some of these relocated hawks were spotted by Terry and his son Ryan in this area.

The USDA will be starting a Kestrel relocation project soon to move the birds from the Chicago airports to Afton Preserve. The hope is they will stay in this area and not return to their previous airport runway locations.

Mr. Hannan commented that he had also received a letter from a University of Chicago Ph.D. in biology student who is studying whether grassland and prairies birds are effective at providing pest control to adjacent agricultural lands. The student would like to use the Afton, Merritt Prairies and South Branch Prairie locations to conduct studies. There have also been NIU students recently trained on prairies burns who will be taking that training back to NIU and Nachusa Grasslands.

Mr. Brown then asked for further discussion regarding the Goals document presented at the last meeting. Mr., Hannan noted that to the point in the document about enhancing advertising for the District, he had brought in examples of mailers and publications from other Forest Preserve District. The documents highlight the benefits of conservation policies and practices as well as District programs and activities. One observation about these publications is that they do tend to be expensive to produce.

Mr. Brown commended the District on its use of social media and web site updates as well as the District's brochure listing the Preserve locations.

Mr. Brown asked about how far the District is in prairie burns since they could get such an early start. Mr. Hannan responded that they are about 50% complete at this point. He

also reminded the Committee that a local cinematographer had done a movie about the forest preserve burn process and noted that he might bring that to a future meeting.

Mr. Hannan then noted that in other developments, he has been invited back for the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the Clean Energy Grant. In addition FEMA is also close to clearing the final steps to transfer the Sycamore Forest Preserve to the District.

Mr. Hannan then introduced Ms. Doty to the Committee and commented that she is a University of Illinois Extension employee who has been the head of the NREC for the past 18 years. He noted that she was going to do a technical presentation to the Committee updating them on the District's educational activities. However, the room change necessitated by the election removed her access to the necessary technical equipment. In light of that, she will be doing a verbal presentation.

Ms. Doty began by thanking the Committee for their time and noting that the NREC year begins with the school year in the Fall, but carries through the summer camp season.

She noted that they have noticed some small declines in Fall field studies and feel that may be tied to an increase in retiring teachers. They feel that the new teachers starting out are not as familiar with the NREC's options nor may have sufficient time for outdoor educational activities.

However, the NREC has also extended programming for home school groups and have developed a 9 month series for them each year. Each Fall, the NREC also hosts NIU students to hear the benefits of environmental education.

Ms. Doty pointed out that she performs "field studies" with her school and home groups, not "field trips" which generally revolve more around formal presentations and generally end with gift shop visits.

She also noted that while some of the activities do slow in winter, they have one teacher who always plans for and requests a winter field study.

In the future, they are hoping to develop a 4<sup>th</sup> grade program centering on the Hoppe Heritage area. The Ney Grange has donated buses that can move the students around the County to various sites that will illustrate the pioneer experience.

Connie Handel handles many of the winter activities and does a curriculum on recycling for Kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> graders. The team goes to schools all across the County from Genoa to Kingston to Sandwich.

They have also started a group of Master Naturalist classes for 5<sup>th</sup> graders. They are currently training about 15 new members and Ms. Doty reminded the Committee how much volunteer support the older Master Naturalists donate to the Forest Preserve District and many other organizations in the County as well.

Ms. Doty then noted to the Committee that the NREC does not have funding to get kids to their camps in a normal year and are extremely concerned in this second year of a budget impasse. She noted that she and her staff member wear many hats and she will again be functioning as lead teacher/janitor/jack of all trades.....

The NREC normally does 6 camps each summer, but may need to drop to 5 this year due to the budget constraints. She noted that it is critical given the needs of the students they serve, that the camps be staffed properly and effectively to provide the attention needed.

She noted that even with the small staff they have, the NREC averages about 4800 kid visits each year and have been able to be fairly consistent in the number despite workload changes across the Counties and budget reductions. Ms. Doty invited the Committee members to come out to the NREC at any time to see the facilities and activities.

She noted also that the local NPR station (WNIJ) has been very beneficial to the NREC in getting out information at no cost with their free news releases. She noted that they also use Facebook as a communication tool.

Ms. Doty also reported on their new addition of a carved bear that stands guard at the NREC entrance. He has been given the anecdotal name of "Forest Stump". Another new arrival is a carved Red Headed Woodpecker.

Ms. Doty noted that she frequently pursues grants to assist with the building upkeep and programs. A recent grant helped to expand the library offerings.

She has also begun a current Wee Naturalist program giving the youngest students a chance to expand their educational experiences. Books and microscopes were acquired to assist with this.

The next grant being sought is to help with floor repairs. The current condition of the floors tends to allow snakes to make inopportune visits to the facility.

Mr. Brown commended Ms. Doty on giving a very thorough and enjoyable report even without the benefit of any technological assistance.

Ms. Doty commented that the students served by the NREC tend to be students who need very structured activities. These are students who do not do well in less structured camps. This stability of expectations and schedule is very critical for some students. She has had students offer to write letters to ask for funding and noted that many families have seen their students have life-changing experiences in the camps. She thanked the Committee for its continued support for the NREC and its activities.

Mr. Brown then returned to the earlier discussion of Kestrel relocation and asked how exactly it is done. Mr. Hannan noted that generally they are net trapped one at a time and then marked prior to relocation.

Mr. Hannan noted he would obtain additional information on the USDA program and provide it to the Committee (copy attached to these minutes).

Mr. Brown then passed out a revised Goals document for review and discussion. Mr. Roman asked where the document will be used and exactly who will see it. Mr. Brown responded that Chair Pietrowski sees the development of these documents growing into a County wide planning document.

Mr. Roman then asked about activities that may have been discussed in executive session and how they may or may not find their way into the Goals document. Mr. Brown noted that the Committee would be cognizant of any projects not fully ready for public release.

Mr. Roman then asked that item #7, regarding finding ways to expand solar powered lighting into the Preserves be removed. He noted that since the Preserves technically are closed at dusk, it may not be beneficial to have lighted areas. Mr. Brown commented that the item began as a way of just highlighting the need to look at ways to expand renewable energy in the District.

Mr., Hannan noted that Kane County uses solar powered gate closers that work without staff. He asked Ms. Doty if she had any suggestions regarding how renewable energy might be increased. Ms. Doty responded that they have explored ways at the NREC. Her first thought is to perhaps use solar powered lighting to highlight the Preserve entry signage. She noted that she will pass any other ideas on to the Committee.

Mr. Brown noted that perhaps item #7 could be changed to “more research focused on expanding renewable energy options”. Mr. Porterfield commented that he would recommend removing the word “promote” from the item. Mr. Brown also noted that the words “solar lighting” should be removed. Ms. Doty also noted that the addition of artificial lighting in the areas could cause disruption in the habitat of nocturnal animals

Mr. Ryan Hannan commented that he has worked with solar powered gates in other Counties and recalls instances where visitors can be trapped by the automatic gate operations. Noted that they generally also have to contain a pin pad and phone number that a visitor can call to get a release code.

Mr. Brown asked if all of the DeKalb Preserves have gates. Mr. Hannan responded that they do, but some may not be closed based on not having enough staff to cover them all every day.

Mr. Brown then referred to item #3 on the Goals document and asked if the Committee had any ideas on promoting forest preserves. Mr. Ryan Hannan noted that many other Counties have decorative pins that advertise their district or forest preserves. Ms. Doty then noted that some areas give magnets to teachers which are very popular and keep the preserves visible. Mr. Porterfield noted that he likes window clings for this purpose as well.

Ms. Capek noted that it can be beneficial to use local municipal television or media channels as well.

Mr. Porterfield asked if anyone does regular nature updates on any of the radio stations locally. Ms. Doty noted that local broadcaster Sue Stevens of WNIJ is a Master Naturalist and is very helpful in promoting nature activities and events. Ms. Doty added that she has done some podcasts, but they are very time consuming and it's hard to budget the time to do them regularly.

Mr. Hannan commented that local photographer Tom Robbins did a recent presentation of photos taken at various Preserves at a local Green Drinks event. Approximately 50 people attended.

Mr. Brown commented that there seem to be so many great photos of the Preserves and they would make a great resource for creating brochures and promotional items. However, he did admit that budget and staff time to prepare such items can be a challenge.

Mr. Brown then asked the Committee to review the section of the Goals document on volunteers and asked if it looked complete. Mr. Hannan responded that it looked very complete.

Mr. Brown noted the section of the document related to support of the Superintendent. Mr. Hannan commented that the Committee and the Board have been extremely supportive to him over the years.

#### **COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS**

Mr. Brown gave the floor to guest Cindy Capek. Ms. Capek introduced herself and reviewed her past experiences as Director of the DeKalb Park District and now member of the Active Communities Initiative. She noted that the group was originally focused around the activities of local YMCA's. However, definitions of priorities often took a long time. One study the group undertook was a walkability study about connectivity between communities. After that study, walkability and Active Transportation came into focus as a priority. Another aspect of the initiative centers on food security and those activities have been highlighted by Dan Kenney and the Community Gardens group.

Active Transportation has been an ongoing focus since approximately 2012. The group meets monthly and there has been a great diversity of membership from both the business communities and private citizens.

The group is very cognizant that getting around the communities without a car is very difficult in DeKalb and Sycamore. Lack of viable transportation options can limit resident's access to work, to shop or to obtain healthy food choices.

The group feels there is great importance to also improving connectivity between communities. They work to change policies on zoning, development, complete streets to try to build those links and move toward greater connectivity. Ms. Capek noted that

Chicago has been very successful in adding opportunities for connections between communities.

However, she cautioned that if you focus solely on roadways and not on other iterations of Active Transportation, you can just end up with a lot of roads, but not much viable connection.

To this end, the group has been monitoring the activities of DSATS (DeKalb Sycamore Area Transportation Study) and their priorities. They have offered to provide assistance and support to the group in Active Transportation opportunities. She noted that active public support coupled with funding can make great changes.

Ms. Capek noted that small efforts can be of great help as well. Recently the group got a grant for bike signs and kiosks as well as getting a strip of sidewalk in front of the Kishwaukee YMCA. The lack of this small missing piece of connection was harming access and possibly placing Y users in danger when they had to walk in the street.

She noted that collaborative efforts between citizens and groups are key to getting other projects funded and accomplished.

The group is continually looking for emerging opportunities and ways to keep the connection momentum moving forward. Members continually attend public meetings and hearings to keep informed and keep the message of Active Transportation going.

Ms. Capek noted that they have also worked to have DeKalb identified formally as a bike friendly city. She noted this is actually a very elaborate process. After much work, the group has achieved a Bronze status designation. She noted that role model cities like Champaign-Urbana demonstrate how to be committed to bike friendly activities. Going through the designation process really illustrated the areas that need improvement and continuing efforts such as improving bike education in the schools. Another area would be efforts to encourage the city to commit to completing streets with designated bike paths.

The group is moving forward with educational efforts and are determining the best used for funding. They regularly report back to the Live Healthy Leadership team and again noted that they are constantly seeking partnerships to improve opportunities.

Ms. Capek commented that she has also done local bike ride events with politicians and local leaders to demonstrate how difficult it can be to get around on a bike. She noted that they would love to see more sidewalks added to Sycamore Road and that is a future priority for safety improvement.

Mr. Porterfield asked what was on the bike signs and kiosks they had obtained. Ms. Capek replied that they contain maps and signage, trail information and also Pedal Pals information regarding bike friendly businesses in the area.

Mr. Porterfield commented that the New York Times has now said that our daily steps goal should be 15,000 rather than the previous 10,000. He noted that he is a supporter of more pedestrian activities and opportunities. One concern is that he often sees conflicts between pedestrians and bikes on some trails and paths. He would support better walking/biking etiquette education being done.

He also commented that though there are some bike paths marked on North First Street, he notes that most bikers use the sidewalks. Ms. Capek noted that generally occurs when bikers are not comfortable with traffic interaction regardless of the street markings.

Mr. Brown asked if Active Transportation would be trail focused. Ms. Capek responded that there are many varied interest groups within the organization who focus on various subjects. However, the groups are supportive of each other's interests. They prefer the subcommittee format to improve overall focus.

Mr. Roman asked about the Prairie Park to Lincoln Hwy. path being proposed and how that would work with the train tracks. Ms. Capek noted there is a pathway under the trestle currently and that would be opened up to avoid forcing use of the street.

Mr. Brown noted that there was a recent story about reconfiguring Route 23, but with no effort to add space for bike lanes, etc. Ms. Capek commented that the state just doesn't have the funds to make those expansions currently.

Mr. Brown thanked Ms. Capek for her report and also thanked Mr. Ryan Hannan for his input to the Committee as well.

Ms. Capek closed by noting the amazing collaborative efforts of many groups that went into getting the trail connecting the new high school in DeKalb. She noted that project really highlighted what a good cooperative community can accomplish.

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

Mr. Porterfield moved to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Roman. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,



Bob Brown, Chairperson  
Forest Preserve District Committee  
BB:kjr