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DeKalb County Government
Sycamore, Illinois

**Forest Preserve District Committee Minutes
June 17, 2014**

The DeKalb County Forest Preserve District Committee met Tuesday June 17, 2014 at 6:00 pm at Afton Forest Preserve. In attendance were committee members: Ms. Fauci, Mr. Cribben, Mr. Brown and Mr. Gudmunson. Ms. Haji-Sheikh arrived after the call to order. Superintendent Hannan was also in attendance. Guests included District Naturalist Al Roloff, NREC Educator Peggy Doty and student intern Alyse Olson.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Ms. Fauci called for a motion to approve the minutes of the May 20, 2014 meeting. Mr. Gudmunson moved to approve the minutes, seconded by Mr. Brown and the motion passed unanimously.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Ms. Fauci called for a motion to approve the agenda. Mr. Gudmunson moved to approve the agenda, seconded by Mr. Cribben and the motion passed unanimously.

MONTHLY REPORTS

Mr. Hannan noted that this month's packet contained information on the recent Northwest Suburban Astronomer's public viewing event at Afton. There were 100+ visitors for the event. The astronomers set up 15 high power telescopes for the public to view the night skies.

He went on to note that we are about 2 weeks out from the prime Summer Prairie flower bloom season at Afton and other prairie preserves.

Mr. Hannan also noted that Ms. Doty and her staff member Connie had provided student number counts in the report for the January to April NREC (Natural Education Resource Center) activities. This period primarily consisted of the school visits, recycling efforts and field trips.

Ms. Doty commented that they had also had a recent visit by autistic students from the Camelot School. She noted that they were greatly engaged by the turtles and snakes at the Center.

Mr. Hannan noted that just south of the Afton barn an Osprey also known as a "Fish Hawk" was seen at the Afton wetlands.

He went on to note that the NRCS had done a story on the conservation efforts at the South Branch Prairie. Also Mr. Roloff met with 30 NRCS staff members from all over the Midwest at the South Branch Prairie and did a training with them on wetland delineation and plant identification skills. They were very impressed with the soils and plants and appreciated the local expertise that was shared by Mr. Roloff and Ms. Olson.

Ms. Fauci noted for the minutes that Ms. Haji-Sheikh had arrived.

Mr. Roloff then formally introduced Ms. Alyse Olson to the Committee and noted that she is studying wildlife biology and ecological restoration at NIU. He noted that Ms. Olson continues the District's fine tradition of attracting mature, intelligent and hard working student interns to assist with the District's work.

Mr. Brown noted that it was nice that the bear recently sighted in the area made an appearance during her time with the District. Mr. Roloff commented that he and Ms. Olson and other staffers had been spotters during the bear's time in the County.

Mr. Hannan noted that Mr. Roloff's Natural Resources report was also in the packet and that the Summer Camps have started at the NREC at Russell Woods.

He then passed out the FY 2013 final audit document to the Committee members and noted that the auditors had commended the District on a well - managed budget and financial practices.

Ms. Fauci then reminded the Committee that there would not be a July Forest Preserve Committee meeting.

Mr. Hannan commented that the Nitro Trail Blazers running club would be starting a fundraising run at the Sycamore Speedway and then running the Great Western Trail. The fundraiser is in support of the Genoa to Russell Woods Trail project.

He then went on to comment that the Ash trees in the Afton Preserve, which were originally brought from the Nehring Preserve as seedlings, have taken a heavy hit from the presence of the Emerald Ash Borer. Many of the trees have been damaged beyond recovery.

Mr. Roloff added that some area residents have asked about treatment. He noted that existing treatments only delay the demise of the trees and are used in some areas to try to spread out the costs of dead tree removal. There, unfortunately, is no treatment that can cure the trees once infected. He estimates that one quarter to one third of the Ash trees in the County preserves have been lost this year. This is a dramatic increase from one year ago.

Ms. Fauci asked if there is any chance the trees might develop a resistance as this goes on. Mr. Roloff responded that the Northern Illinois Invasive Plant program has been studying that and there is no evidence that resistance is occurring.

Ms. Fauci then asked if the District always takes down the dead trees or leaves them for habitat. Mr. Roloff noted that for safety, trees near picnic areas or other public areas are generally taken down.

Mr. Roloff then spoke on a new project he is investigating to try to ameliorate the loss of the Ash trees. He would like to ask volunteers to gather acorns and walnuts and other seeds from other local trees for a mass planting this fall in the areas that Ash trees have been most impacted. He notes that if this is not done, other weedy trees could take over.

Ms. Fauci noted that the current group of volunteers could certainly be used for this, but that more involvement would be very helpful as well. Mr. Roloff noted that the current volunteers are very busy currently, so he saw this as a way to reach out and engage other community members.

Ms. Fauci asked what the overall percentage was of Ash trees across the Preserves. Mr. Roloff noted that it was probably 10% in the floodplain forest areas.

Mr. Brown noted that this infestation has really hit local subdivisions who relied on the Ash as a fast growing tree. He noted that he had recently lost a tree to the Borer.

Mr. Roloff noted that walnuts are also currently in danger from an insect vector heading this way. This could result in a situation deadlier than the Dutch Elm disease many years ago. He noted that this insect spreads most quickly among Black Walnut trees.

He went on to say that Butternuts are also in danger because they typically take 20 years for a tree to be sufficiently mature to produce nuts. If the elder trees are damaged and the younger are killed before reaching maturity, it could prove devastating to that species.

Mr. Roloff asked the Committee for a consensus on whether they thought the seed gathering/replacement program is something they would like him to pursue. He noted that he wanted to get started soon on developing press opportunities to encourage the volunteer seed collectors. He closed by noting that the actual planting could likely be accomplished by the existing District Land Stewards and other volunteers.

Mr. Cribben noted that a tremendous amount of acorns seem to be produced annually and this would be a very good use for them, especially the White Oak variety that germinates in the fall and the Red and Black Oak which germinate later. He commented that this seems like a very worthwhile project to prevent the invasive Buckthorn or Honeysuckle from taking advantage of the loss of the Ash trees. He commented that he has a Shagbark Hickory that he would be happy to gather the seeds from for the project.

Mr. Roloff noted that would be a very valuable species, but they would need to be careful on the harvesting so they properly germinate.

Mr. Roloff noted that it is also a challenge to beat the local deer, turkeys and squirrels from gathering the acorns before the volunteers can.

Mr. Cribben asked if the husks of the acorns should be on or off. Mr. Roloff replied that ideally they should be off. Ms. Doty asked when harvesting should begin. Mr. Roloff replied that in about a month some species will start to produce, but that the majority would occur in the fall.

Ms. Doty then reported on the recent Black Bear visitation to the County. She noted that even before this had occurred she had been doing a large predator presentation for various groups that actually put her a bit ahead of the issue before it occurred.

She noted to the Committee that this is the time of year the immature male bears venture out to seek new food opportunities. She notes that a young male can venture as far as 100 miles from where they were born. However, they tend to return to their original areas because the young female bears rarely go beyond 10 miles from their birth places. She notes that there are roughly 750,000 bears in the U.S and they are not actually endangered as a species currently. However, in the past their numbers were greatly reduced by human hunters because they had value. The bear has been sighted in Rockford, Genoa, Sycamore, DeKalb, and now around Chana near some honey bee colonies.

There are new laws recently signed to protect bears, cougars and wolves but that protection does not go into effect until next year. Her hope is that this particular male makes it all the way back to his original territory safely as that will greatly reduce the impact of subsequent “visits” on the public’s imagination.

Ms. Doty noted that she had discussed good strategies for the situation with Sheriff Scott and he was supportive of the principle of letting the bear just pass through without undue contact or intervention. She went on to note that there had been a sighting of a female bear in Bureau County, but that was likely a pet. She noted that Illinois is not really very good bear habitat and while they will come down to explore, it is unlikely they would stay.

She noted that Black Bears do not generally engage with humans unless they are provoked. If confronted by a Black Bear, the best strategy is to first make sure the Bear has an escape route away from you and then “get big”. Stand tall, yell etc. This will usually drive the bear off.

Ms. Fauci asked what the bear’s role is in the ecosystem. Ms. Doty replied that they are an Apex predator who often partner well with wolves, opportunistically consuming the remaining carrion left after a wolf feeds. They tend to only “hunt” garbage cans, berries, honey and rarely seek to kill. She noted that the recent spikes in Coyote populations are due to the lack of wolves. But as she had noted previously, Illinois is not a great habitat for bears or wolves because of human population densities.

She noted that Cougars are going to be a more challenging visitor as they tend to not scare easily and very few police departments have tranquilizer guns readily available.

She noted that the only thing that kills an Apex predator is generally a human with a gun or a vehicle. She closed by reiterating her hope that this visit to the state ends well for the current bear so that the next visit will be far less interesting to the population. This will, hopefully, allow both sides to co-exist peacefully going forward.

COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS

Ms. Haji-Sheikh noted that she had recently attending her first Regional Planning Commission meeting where she had also done a presentation to the Commission on the Bike Friendly Initiative (Pedal Pal). She noted that the project is being very well received and supported by local officials and business places. She has also been meeting with the DeKalb Park District to bring them on Board as well as scheduling upcoming meetings with Kishwaukee College and the Sycamore Park District.

She closed by noting that she had also attended the recent Kishwaukee River watershed tour and found that a very interesting event.

Mr. Brown asked Mr. Hannan about the origin of the bell located at the front entrance of the Afton Preserve. Mr. Hannan noted that this was originally a part of the McGirr Homestead and the bell had been on Kenny McGirr's farm. He lived in the Afton farmhouse built in 1902 that was said to be the first house in the County with indoor plumbing. The Cypress water tower is still on site and when it was working, water was pumped up into the tank by the windmill and gravity fed to the house. He commented that Kenny also collected hundreds of Indian arrow heads on their farm and he also found buttons from the WWII uniforms of German POW's who worked on the McGirr farm. The original barn burnt down in the 1940's, but Kenny McGirr showed Mr. Hannan the secret resting place of a bottle of Irish whiskey that had been hidden in the foundation of the new barn built shortly after the fire. .

Ms. Fauci commented that she had met a man in Austria who commented that he had been held at a POW camp in Illinois during the war.

Mr. Hannan noted that there was also an old cattle bridge on the Afton farm. Mr. Roloff reported that one time he saw two older gentlemen driving around the creek area. When he asked them what they were doing, they noted that they were looking for a bridge they had built when they were young. Mr. Roloff took them to the bridge that was still there and their initials still intact in the concrete.

Mr. Hannan closed by commenting that Kenny McGirr mentioned a sister who died earlier in life was buried somewhere in the Afton Preserve and a family member who died from a work horse kick. Mr. Hannan then closed by noting that the bell likely originated at the old Afton School, the lumber from that torn down school is part of the Afton barn today.

Ms. Haji-Sheikh commented that she had also recently attended the Citizen's Police Academy hosted by the County Sherriff's department.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

Ms. Fauci then asked for a motion to enter Executive Session. Mr. Gudmunson moved to take the Committee into executive session, seconded by Ms. Haji-Sheikh. A roll call vote was held and the motion passed with 5 Committee members voting in the affirmative, none in the negative and 2 absent.

Following the Executive Session, Ms. Haji-Sheikh moved to return the Committee to public session, seconded by Mr. Cribben. A roll call vote was held and the motion passed with 5 Committee members voting in the affirmative, none in the negative and 2 absent.

ADJOURNMENT

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

Respectfully submitted,

Julia Fauci, Chairperson
Forest Preserve District Committee
JF:kjr