

River Woods Property in South Haven Township Public Input Meeting

Tuesday, February 24, 2015

6:30 – 8:30pm

The DNR opened the meeting with introductions and explained the purpose of the meeting. The property acquisition would provide public recreational opportunities along the Black River and Kal-Haven Trail. Prior to the property purchase, the DNR reached out to the City of South Haven and South Haven Township for support and possible partnerships. It was clarified the DNR is not pursuing a seasonal-stay campground. The camping stays will be the same as current DNR camping reservations. The DNR was working with the Township in requesting a rezoning change for the property. This rezoning request was temporarily delayed until communication with the local stakeholders was accomplished. It was noted the DNR's first priority in 2015-16 was to work with MDOT in replacing the section of Kal-Haven Trail underneath the Blue Star Hwy bridge as part of the bridge replacement.

The following are comments from the public:

- There was a concern with a previous statement by the City of South Haven stating that camping was to be seasonal (longer than the DNR camping requirement -15 day maximum stay).
- There was a concern with the DNR entering into a lease agreement with City of South Haven. It was felt that the lease agreement would enable City of South Haven to deviate from the DNR's 15 day maximum stay and possibly provide seasonal campground stays. The DNR responded that these issues would need further clarification should the DNR enter a lease agreement with the City.
- Explanation was given regarding a potential lease agreement with SHARA (South Haven Area Recreation Authority).
- A representative from the South Haven Township explained they would closely review the proposed uses for this property as part of final site plan review.
- Local private campground owners were concerned with competition from this campground. A question was raised as to how the 39 undeveloped building lots were to be used. Potential cottages on this site would be problematic regarding competition.
- The DNR clarified the 39 undeveloped building lots provided good potential for full hook-up camp sites.
- There was a desire to see the proposed site plan for the property as part of the Township's rezoning procedure.

- There was a comment supporting the purchase of the property. This piece of property is big asset to public/community. This purchase by the State stopped any potential residential/commercial development. Now the public will have various recreational opportunities including fishing, hiking, biking, etc.
- It was stated by a campground owner that a day-use facility (no camping) would meet all of the recreational needs.
- It was commented by a campground interest that DNR campgrounds are subsidized and that's the reason Van Buren SP is mostly full during the use season. Private campgrounds are not subsidized and therefore have to charge a higher price. A potential public campground would compete with neighboring private campgrounds, potentially unfair if DNR campground fees are lower than private campground fees. It was clarified that private campgrounds are not full during the use season as the city/township has claimed.
- Several facts were stated regarding the amount of revenue generated from camping and tourism. South Haven is a tourism destination. There was support for the development of a state park for this property. This location has many assets for recreational opportunities, including the 3 P's - pedestrian, pedal, and paddle. Area businesses support this project.
- Private campground occupancy was clarified that they are not all full. A question was raised as to why develop another campground and bring additional competition if private campgrounds are not full. Campground owners support a day-use park.
- The DNR clarified that state parks are self-sustained, with 70% - 80% of revenues coming from camping fees, and the Recreation Passport, and nearly no "general fund" tax dollars. Further explanation was given as to how state parks are self-funded. It was clarified that the DNR also pays PILT (payment in lieu of taxes).
- It was stated a new campground will cost the DNR 5 million in development costs. Private campgrounds cannot compete with the DNR regarding necessary start-up costs of a campground. Area campground owners support a day-use area. This project's initial discussion with the Township and City was the start of bad information being dissimulated to the area by the local officials. Private campground occupancy rates supplied to DNR by City/Township were incorrect. It was felt that a new DNR campground will not result in additional campers for neighboring private campgrounds.
- The DNR stated that this initial planning meeting is a good start in communication for this project.
- When will DNR develop a plan?? Will the developed plan be presented at the rezoning meeting?? Attendees wanted to see the proposed development plan.

- There was a question regarding campground fees per night. What are campground fees going to be?? Possibly make DNR campground fees the same cost as neighboring private campground fees.
- It was clarified by a Township representative that the Township does not accept the site plans produced by Abonmarche. In addition, the Township will not accept the type of development as proposed on these Abonmarche plans. It was asked of the stakeholders to give consideration of the recreational aspects of the proposed property. The DNR's purpose of this meeting was to listen to stakeholder comments.
- It was noted that 4 layers of government (state and local) have been involved up to this point. The DNR clarified that the property purchase process involves reaching out to local groups (Townships, Counties, Cities, etc.) for support in the purchase. The DNR actively pursues partnerships when possible.
- Main issue: Special use permit to be completed at same time as rezoning. There was a desire to see the development plan. Residents will proceed to a referendum vote if DNR proceeds with rezoning without first presenting a development plan. It was clarified that the DNR will present a concept plan for public review prior to proceeding with the rezoning through the Township.
- It was noted that the DNR was seeking a partnership with SHARA as part of the property purchase. The DNR clarified no agreement has been signed with SHARA. A public comment was made that SHARRA would like to see a high density campground in order to provide revenues to recreational facilities – soccer fields, etc.
- Make the lease public so that everyone knows what's in it. A desire for transparency. If DNR camp fees are lower than the surrounding private campground fees, there will be issue with unfair competition.
- Private campgrounds would be in support of rustic sites at proposed park. It was noted that Van Buren SP refers overflow campers to private campgrounds when Van Buren SP campground is full.
- The DNR reiterated that they will prepare a concept plan for review prior to pursuing rezoning through the Township.
- Was the DNR looking at a nature center on the property? The DNR responded that nature centers come with construction and operational costs. The DNR briefly explained it's current funding status and self-sufficiency.
- It was stated that the role of government should not be to compete with private industry.

- A comment was made regarding the “100 year rule”, which relates to how something new affects the community in 100 years. Supports this park.
- There was a desire for this property to be more than a day-use park and to include overnight camping. An idea was suggested to charge a greater camping fee than the private campground fees.
- Kal Haven RV Park Campground exists along the Black River. They offer the same amenities as what state park is proposing, and this campground is never full.
- One private campground owner investigated the purchase of this property when the price was at 1.2 million. Their calculations resulted in a \$90.00 camp fee per night in order to make the property purchase profitable. Their comment was a private purchase of the property for the purposes of a private campground would not work financially.
- It was noted that the Gus Macker Tournament does not come to South Haven anymore.
- There was general consensus from private campground owners for support of tent camping only at the property.
- Brief discussion was about the hook-up fees needed to be paid for sewer service. The private industry cannot compete with the state parks.
- There was a comment preferring the proposed campground to be operated by the state. This individual did not trust SHARA and City to run the proposed campground.
- There was a comment regarding a level playing field with private campgrounds.
- Stated was the disappointment in this meeting taking place after the rezoning request was made with the Township. The DNR clarified their real estate section recommended the pursuance of rezoning of the property. Subsequently, rezoning was pursued without any knowledge of any disagreement from the local public. Once the DNR realized this disagreement from the public, the DNR requested to the Township a temporary delay of further action on the rezoning until communication was made with the public stakeholders.

The DNR stated the next steps...

1. Meeting Minutes from this meeting will made available to the public.
2. Develop concept plan for the property to include bubble diagrams for proposed features.
3. Hold a public input meeting on the proposed concept plan.

Meeting adjourned at 8:25pm.