

Nature lovers: We don't want Olympics

BY RUSSELL LISSAU

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When Bob Friend and his wife, Kerstin, bought a house in Wauconda Township about a year ago, the home's proximity to the Lakewood Forest Preserve was a key factor.

Friend's property backs up to the sprawling preserve - Lake County's biggest at more than 2,600 acres - and he visits a few times a week. Sometimes he brings a dog for a walk; he photographs the landscape on other expeditions.

So when county forest district officials in January announced plans for a 15,000-seat equestrian arena and other amenities at Lakewood as part of the effort to bring the 2016 Olympics to the Chicago area, Friend was shocked.

"It never occurred to me that this kind of massive new construction (could be) plopped right into the heart of a forest preserve," said Friend, 59. "There's an issue of trust here."

Friend is among the people who feel betrayed by the Olympic deal. Many live in Friend's Tamarack neighborhood; others are nature lovers from throughout the region. They're worried about the proposed facility's impact on Lakewood's plentiful plants and animals, as well as its potential uses after the Olympics.

Working individually and in groups, they hope to quash the plan before a single shovel cuts into the earth.

"You just cannot put anything like this in the middle of that delicate ecosystem and not have it impact the entire area," said Larry Svec, president of the Tamarack Homeowners Association. "(This is) an abuse of forest preserve property."

Forest district officials maintain the equestrian facility can be built with minimal wildlife impact. They also say the site would become a commercial equestrian facility after the Olympics and not be used for concerts, sports or other activities unrelated to riding.

"That's not what we do," forest board President Bonnie Thomson Carter said. "We are good stewards of the land."

A \$12.5 million plan

The Olympic proposal for Lakewood - in the works since November, under strict secrecy orders from Olympic organizers - was unveiled Jan. 9 and approved a week later.

It's contingent on Chicago being named the host city for the Olympics. The winner will be announced in 2009.

The Lakewood proposal calls for a \$12.5 million equestrian complex on about 300 acres

south of Ivanhoe Road and west of Fairfield Road. Donations - not local property-tax revenue - would fund the project, officials have said.

Olympic organizers considered sites throughout the Chicago area - including other spots in Lake County and even Wisconsin - before settling on Lakewood.

Environmental studies were part of the selection process. Most of the targeted land is farmland that's not ecologically sensitive, officials have said.

"We didn't find any (potential sites) that really seemed to be as appropriate to the sport or as responsible to the community as the Lakewood site," said Doug Arnot, director of sports venues and operations for the Chicago 2016 committee.

The facility would be used during the two-week-long Olympics and the weeklong Paralympic Games, which always follow in the host city.

To accommodate events, outdoor and indoor arenas, stables and other facilities would be built. New horse trails would augment existing ones.

Officials predict nearly 200,000 visitors and participants will attend the Lakewood events, shuttling to the site from remote parking lots. Afterward, some temporary facilities would be removed and the size of the outdoor arena would be reduced, but the indoor riding area and stables would remain.

A private business would run the remaining equestrian center for the district as a money-making operation, plans say, much like the district's Meadowview Stables near Mettawa.

"We saw that as a real positive for us," forest district Executive Director Tom Hahn said. "Just having an Olympic facility in Lake County ... where (people) can ride where the Olympians rode - I think it's a special environment."

No forest commissioners opposed the plan when the board voted Jan. 16. Civilian resistance has been plentiful, however.

'I could just weep'

Among the plan's loudest critics is Lake Zurich resident Sheilah Watson, a hiking and bird-watching enthusiast who said she visits Lakewood at least once or twice a day.

"It's a place that I can go to when I want to leave my cares and concerns behind," Watson said.

Watson formed a group called Preserve Lakewood Preserve in 2004 after district officials developed plans - unrelated to the Olympics - for more picnic shelters at Lakewood. The group has built up steam recently because of the Olympic deal.

Her main concern is the safety of Lakewood's animals and plants. Nearly two dozen of the preserve's many species are endangered or threatened, including the sandhill crane, yellow-headed blackbird and the dwarf raspberry.

Noise and pollution from the construction of the venue - let alone the operation of the facility when it's done - will overwhelm Lakewood's flora and fauna, Watson said.

"I could just weep," said Watson, who claimed her group boasts 2,000 supporters. "It's like something is dying in my heart."

Watson's band isn't the only organization opposed to Olympic events at Lakewood. A group called Voters for Preservation, of which Friend is a member, formed to protest the plan and speak out on other environmental issues.

"Some people don't even know what's been proposed," Friend said. "We hope to make people aware of what's actually going on."

So do forest district officials, who've vowed they wouldn't create anything that will hurt the species at Lakewood, endangered or otherwise.

New trails would be built in open fields, not in more vulnerable wooded areas, Hahn said. Buffers would separate facilities from areas populated by sandhill cranes and other birds, he said.

As for construction pollution, silt fences could be erected and dust-control measures would be taken, too, Hahn said.

"There will be some impact, but we'll minimize it," he said.

The post-Games facility's impact on the site and Lakewood's neighbors was particularly an issue for Arnot. The complex won't be nearly as big as the equestrian facility built for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, he said.

Now called the Georgia International Horse Park, the site hosts concerts, road races, rodeos and other events. That won't happen at Lakewood, Arnot insists.

"We did not want to propose a facility that would turn into a white elephant," he said. "(We're) quite satisfied that we are being responsible to the wildlife and the community overall."

Too extreme?

Those assurances aren't good enough for Watson. She's launched a Web site, www.preservelakewood.com, that features photographs of Lakewood's wildlife, maps and information about the Olympic proposal and a petition objecting to any changes in the section of Lakewood south of Ivanhoe Road.

She and other critics also have spoken at public meetings, penned letters to local newspapers and written to Olympic organizers.

Even though the forest board inked the deal with Chicago months ago, Watson hopes to persuade officials to relocate the events.

"We think it would be great to have it in Lake County, but ... it does not belong in a forest preserve," Watson said. "We're just shocked that they can say it won't affect the environment."

Among Watson's allies is Svec, who says the proposal contradicts the forest district's mission.

"I pay tax money to the forest preserve district to preserve and protect open space, not to set aside land for future development," said Svec, 49. "This is extreme development."

Hahn and Carter disagree. They cited several construction projects - the playground at Independence Grove, the Greenbelt Cultural Center and the Ryerson Woods welcoming center among them - that improved preserves and drew new visitors.

Hahn also said the plans for the equestrian complex would have to meet the standards of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources and other environmental agencies before any dirt is moved.

"It's not going to be done in a vacuum," he said. "We're fully cognizant that we need to keep this as sensitive as possible."

Carter believes most of the plan's critics are upset because they don't know the actual details. The district is committed to working with area residents and activists on the plan, which will be fleshed out in the months to come, she said.

"Be part of the process," Carter said. "Help us help you."

Watson isn't interested - not yet, anyway. She's only willing to work with the district on an Olympic plan once it's clear the facility will be built.

Until then, Watson said, she'll fight against it.

"I'm a dog with a bone," she said. "I'm not giving up."

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