

Letter to Editor by Bob Friend (published in Daily Herald)
Re: Proposed Olympic Horse Park in Lakewood Forest Preserve
Date: Feb. 19, 2007

BOONDOGGLE IN THE WOODS

From the moment on Jan. 9 that plans were announced for an Olympic equestrian center in Lakewood Forest Preserve, it was evident that all the forest preserve board members were going to be development-at-any-cost boosters, and their fawning praise for the big-money proponents became a broken record after awhile.

Many of us regular folks are ardently opposed to this boondoggle -- and increasingly so. It is sheer nonsense to think that having Olympic horse events near Wauconda is going to put it, surrounding towns, and the whole of Lake Co., Illinois, "on the world stage." After all, not everyone in the U.S. and the world, perhaps unfortunately so, really cares that much about the Olympics, and I personally never even knew there were Olympic horse events until the Jan. 9 meeting. In fact, I'd bet that before all this hoopla and backstage maneuvering began, 90 per cent of the board members were equally clueless. Further, the supposed long-term economic benefit to a region, derived from hosting such events, is generally overblown.

I am not anti-horse. Equestrians have a right to use their designated trails, and the great majority of them are responsible stewards of the environment. I do have grave concerns about a huge horse park being built where the planners envision it. If the Olympics come to Chicago, this may indeed be an honor for the region. And if horse-showing events are going to be a part of the mix, I guess they have to be held somewhere. But couldn't that "somewhere" be an upgraded existing fairgrounds facility? Or an urban area that needs improvement? If indeed the "somewhere" turns out to be in the middle of a forest preserve, I guess I could put up with eight months of construction with diesel-powered bulldozers and other heavy equipment disturbing the peace every day. I guess I could put up with untold thousands of spectators, heavy shuttle bus traffic and blaring loudspeakers for a few weeks. And I guess I could put up with the resulting litter blowing across the fields and woods I hike, bike and ski in.

But then what? Proponents have touted Georgia International Horsepark, constructed in a run-down area near Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics, as an example of how beneficial such a facility can be to a community, even after the Games have come and gone. I researched it online (www.georgiahorsepark.com); I'd been under the impression that G.I.H. saw some use after the Olympics, but I was amazed to read about the number and types of events hosted there. Well, maybe it's a good thing for the local economy around Atlanta, but we all must keep in mind that the Lake County Forest Preserve Board wants to put our version of this into a forest preserve, not some blighted area in need of a facelift.

The commissioners have made it clear that, after the Olympics, the equestrian center will be hosting numerous horse competitions; so we who live nearby will be regularly "treated" to the announced "play-by-play." And of course the commissioners will see to it that there will be as many events as possible in order to keep money coming in to run the place. This would be bad enough, but it is also almost certain that the venue's use, ostensibly for equestrian events, will evolve due to economic concerns. (The Georgia facility, for example, is being used for a lot more than horse events.)

Will we be seeing (and hearing) arena football games? Country music concerts? Monster truck events? One thing is for sure: If this equestrian center is forced upon us, and then later on the "pro" people become "con" people because they realize they've made a big mistake in allowing it to be built, getting the thing closed will prove extremely difficult. Why can't this facility, if we must have it, be constructed in a less sensitive environment? The area slated for development (read: destruction) is better off in its present state.

We don't need a 15,000-seat Olympic stadium in a forest preserve.

Robert E. Friend
Robert E. Friend
Wauconda Township