

AA residents fight to save Black Pond Woods

BY CHARLES CHILD
CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

The birds are returning to Black Pond Woods, breaking a long winter's silence with early morning calls. The sun shines 14 hours a day, compared to just nine hours in late December, coaxing green from oaks, hickories and maples.

The woods are a rarity in Ann

Arbor. These 32 pristine wooded acres, complete with a pond, are just two miles from downtown.

The problem, for neighbors and migrating birds, is that bulldozers could show up in August.

For 24 years, Courtelis Co., a Miami, Fla.-based real-estate investment company, has waited to develop 26 acres of the land. Twice, dating from 1968, elaborate devel-

opment plans were stymied.

About 10 years ago, Courtelis donated to the city for a park six acres surrounding Black Pond, even though the company's development plans had failed to materialize.

The company's third development plan, however, was approved by the city's planning commission last month. Tonight, the city council will consider the plan.

Despite the commission's approval, the fate of the woods is far from settled. A group of citizens has rallied to save the woods. With petitions, grant applications and jawboning, the group hopes to persuade the council to pay Courtelis an estimated \$800,000 to preserve the property as a park. Other estimates put the price of the property over \$1 million.

The decision comes at a crucial time for Ann Arbor's preservationists. Development has accelerated in the 1980s, whittling away at remaining open space. For a city that takes pride in its green consciousness, opportunities to save parkland are dwindling.

"Ann Arbor is running out of prime pieces (of parkland)," said Peg Molin, who chairs the Ann Arbor Parks Advisory Commission. "The city is looking more like Southfield."

Elias Vassilaros, vice president of Courtelis in Miami, said he'd be happy to sell the land to the city. As a sign of good faith, he agreed to hold the bulldozers until Aug. 1 to give the council time to make up its mind.

But if the council won't buy, he wants to move ahead. "Our problem is that we've owned it for so many years, we want to sell," he said.

The plan calls for building 43 homes on the acreage and saving many of the trees.

Working to persuade the city to write Vassilaros a check is Jennifer Hill, a neighbor and coordinator of Friends of Black Pond Woods. To Hill, at stake is more than pretty trees near her home.

If society is to change its destructive attitude toward the environment, people must appreciate the outdoors, she said. Thus, 32 acres of woods within a city are a priceless laboratory for teaching youngsters

the value and beauty of nature.

"People won't care if they don't know what's being lost," Hill said.

The woods have many biological and geological lessons to teach. William Farrand, a geology professor at University of Michigan, told the city that the woods are the finest undisturbed "kettle" landscape remaining in Ann Arbor.

To geologists, a kettle is a basin created when a huge piece of ice separated from a retreating glacier. Black Pond, in the northern portion of the woods, was formed when an ancient chunk of ice melted, leaving a depression that is filled today by water.

Above the pond runs a kame, a ridge of gravel and debris formed by outwash from the melting glacier.

Today, the kame is covered with a mature stand of red and white oak, hickory, black walnut and cherry trees.

The southern portion of the property is a brushy tangle — unimpressive except to the

trained observer. "It was once farmed and now is a successional forest," returning to a mature state, Hill said.

Bordering the property to the south is the Leslie Science Center. Eugene Leslie, a public-spirited UM professor who died without heirs, willed his farmstead to the city for educational purposes. He also gave the city nearby land for the 18-hole Leslie Park Golf Course, which borders Black Pond Woods. The science center, with its parking lot and offices, would be an ideal base for exploring the woods, Hill said.

Like most Michigan cities, Ann Arbor is financially strapped. So it might seem extremely difficult to pry \$800,000 out of the city's treasury, no matter how laudable the cause.

The preservationists, however, have an ace in the hole. In 1988, Ann Arbor voters approved a half-mill tax to raise money to acquire parkland. The tax will raise about \$900,000 annually for five years.

Black Pond Woods, though, is just one of dozens of properties competing for the acquisition cash. The parks advisory commission, which advises the city council on park issues, has decided that parcels along the Huron River, which bisects the city, are first in line.

To ease the financial pain, the city has applied for a \$500,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, which helps municipalities buy parkland. But the state's decision won't be known until January.

The Friends of Black Pond group has approached the Trust for Public Land for a loan the city could use to buy the property. A representative of the New York City-based trust, which works to preserve ecologically important land, is scheduled to visit the property in May, Hill said.

Earlier this year, the council agreed to pay close to \$700,000 for 36 acres near Bird Hills Park.

If the council "tries to buy Black Pond, there won't be money for other parcels waiting on the list," said Councilman Joe Borda. "How it will be worked out, I don't know."

Councilman Jerry Schleicher added, "It all comes down to dollar signs. The public support is there. But if we can't afford it, the developer should go ahead." **CSB**

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Council Oks Black Pond Woods delay

By JUDSON BRANAM
NEWS STAFF REPORTER

A litany of complaints from activists opposed to the construction of houses in Black Pond Woods led the Ann Arbor City Council to agree Monday to a one-month delay of a building plan.

Activists working to arrange financing to buy the 26-acre nature area in north-central Ann Arbor to preserve it as a park raised several objections to a plan to develop homes on the land.

Members of Friends of Black

Pond Woods, a group pressing for purchase of the area, argued that the plan did not meet the city's natural features guidelines for preserving landmark trees, and that the land's steep slopes and wetlands would be destroyed by the site work needed to create building lots.

"Once the first bulldozer moves on the first of that 25 acres, you can kiss it all goodbye," said park supporter John Benzik.

Subdivision opponents also said council approval of the construc-

tion plans would hurt their efforts to buy the land and give it permanent protection from development.

Black Pond neighbor Pamela Eitzcorn-Dymond said she is confident financing will be available for the \$1.8 million parcel, which is owned by Courtelis Development Co. of Miami and slated for development by Novi builder John Vincenti.

Vincenti representative Ray Cousineau said the company has provided all information requested by city staffers, and that the com-

pany is willing to delay construction until Aug. 1 to give preservationists time to raise money.

Eitzcorn-Dymond would not name the funding source, but said the Trust for Public Land would act as a funding agency to transfer the land to public ownership. She told council members — who earlier had discussed the large bite such a purchase would take from the \$1 million-a-year city parks acquisition fund — that the city would not have to contribute to the purchase price if her plans succeed.

Preservationists, including the city Parks Advisory Commission, have tried to arrange for a delay in the land in exchange for a delay in development. The city also has made its own effort, applying for a state grant to help purchase the area as a park.

Council members asked City Hall staff to determine whether the plan adheres to the natural features guidelines, and to look at potential drainage problems. Discussion of the site plan will resume June 11.

