

Township use agreement for Reeds Lake 'park' meets opposition

BY JAN HOLST
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When Grand Rapids Township officials agreed to a five-year agreement with the Woodcliff Park Association maintenance and use of a small parcel of land with Reeds Lake access, they met angry opposition from another group of residents.

Most of the dozen or so people who made public comments last week argued for complete public access to the 0.7-acre parcel, which has been maintained by the association for decades.

Saying he recognized the association members had huge emotional and financial interest in the outcome, East Grand Rapids resident Randy Allaben told the board, "They have been trespassing on township property for years, and it is an incredible valuable piece of property."

Township officials not only disagree about the parcel's value, they maintain that it is not feasible to open it as a public park.

"Frankly in 1911, when John Bonnell gave away the land, he likely did so because it was not build-able and a swamp," said GR Township Supervisor Michael DeVries, who said the township was given the property in 1945. "The township never had a park there and there was never public access. This agreement is what is most reasonable for all the people in the township."

A lawsuit filed against the association calling for opening the "park" to the public pushed the township into looking at ownership. When they discovered the WPA owned a small parcel of land, but did not have legal rights to exclusive use of the parcel located on township land, they sought legal advice. They considered options ranging from closing

the area to everyone to opening it to the public. They concluded the area was too small to support the infrastructure needed to make it accessible to the general public.

"To create a park would be nice," said Trustee Chris Afendoulis, "but it is really too small and we don't have unlimited resources to do that. I like the idea of this short-term agreement, which allows the WPA members who has been using it for 80 some years to continue to do so. This is reasonable based on the amount of people the area will support."

"It is a temporary arrangement and we still own the land," said Trustee Ed Robinette.

Neighbors who live near the parcel were unhappy that they didn't know the property belonged to the township. One resident said that he has walked by it dozens and

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dozens of times assuming it was private and another said the homeowners across the peninsula have always had to allow the public to fish off "their backyards."

Some argued that the agreement was negotiated behind closed doors and the township was trying to push it through on a holiday week without notifying the rest of the township residents.

Township officials said there were no negotiations, but rather once they realized the WPA did not have an agreement to use the property, they presented the association with an agreement that would force them to open membership to non neighbors. Because of the size of the property and environmental sensitivity of the wetlands, the agreement limits the extra memberships to 25 and allows the WPA to charge fees to offset liability and maintenance costs.

"Establishing a temporary agreement to maintain the property in the way it has been maintained for year seems prudent at this time but it doesn't mean everyone will like it," said Afendoulis, who noted that public comment at the board meeting was unusually one-sided. "I don't know why the WPA members are not here or are remaining quiet," he said. "Some of them weren't happy and some were even advocating for adverse possession."

The use agreement approved by the WPA members a week earlier passed the GR Township Board by a vote of 6 to 1 last week. Trustee Jim Saalfeld, who resigned the same night to take his newly elected seat on the Kent County Board of Commissioners, cast the lone no vote, saying he was uncomfortable with a provision in the agreement calling for board-approved rules for WPA membership that were not yet established.

Township officials called the decision difficult, but maintained it was a good solution allowing for maintenance of the land, additional users while retaining ownership, and options for future township use.

Wolverine run set for Dec. 31

The 27th annual Wolverine Resolution Run is set for 3:30 p.m. on New Year's Eve in East Grand Rapids.

The race is a four-mile run/walk around Reeds Lake

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Township opening private 'park' for limited public use

BY JAN HOLST
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In response to a lawsuit in which they weren't named, Grand Rapids Township is poised to sign an agreement with the Woodcliff Park Association opening a small park on the north shore of Reeds Lake to the public.

The Friends of Reeds Lake, a group who have not identified themselves, filed suit on Sept. 8 against the association trying to force them to open up a parcel of land within the John H. Bonnell Park. The association has maintained the parcel as a private park for their members.

The nearly half-acre "beach" and dock area is on Grand Rapids Township land. "We always knew we owned the land," said Supervisor Michael DeVries, "and we assumed the association had some kind of agreement from Bonnell to use that piece."

While not named in the suit, the township consulted attorneys to find out if the association had exclusive rights to the land and, if not, to find a way to open it to the public, while protecting the area," said DeVries. "Woodcliff has not been able to demonstrate

exclusive use of the land," he said.

Opening the parcel to anyone who might want lake access was not practical due to environmental sensitivities, the lack of public restrooms, narrow streets, and limited parking, he said.

The township then pursued a use agreement with the association, similar to use agreements for other public land. The agreement was expected to be signed by the GR Township Board Tuesday, Dec. 21. It calls for non-neighborhood memberships, but limits the amount that may be issued. "The Woodcliff Park Association has been excellent stewards of that piece of property," said DeVries, "but it is public property and we need to make sure it accessible to the entire public but on a very limited basis."

If the board accepts the terms of the agreement, it will go into effect, but meanwhile the lawsuit is pending. A request for dismissal scheduled for Dec. 3 was cancelled, due to ongoing negotiations with the two parties. Michael Dantuma, the attorney representing Friends of Reeds Lake, said he did not want to comment on the use agreement until he consulted with his clients.

Local residents have chance to dispose of Christmas trees

Ada residents may drop off natural Christmas trees to the back parking lot of Ada Park from now through Monday, Jan. 13.

They will be recycled into wood chips for use in the park. Remove decorations, wires strings ribbons and other items that might interfere with a chipper.

Cascade Township is asking residents to bring trees to a new location

will accept trees at the parking lot behind the Buttrick Fire Station at Buttrick Avenue and 30th Street from Dec. 26 through Jan. 11.

The City of East Grand Rapids will collect trees curbside during the weeks of Jan. 3 and Jan. 10. City crews will collect trees that have removed all decorations, especially metal ones. The trees will be recycled and used for

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George Perles discuss the
of college coaching in light
Coach Mark Dantonio's
attack. C1

Suit claims public has right to lakeside park

Homeowners group claims it owns the property 'by adverse possession'

BY ERIN ALBANESE
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS TOWNSHIP — A group called The Friends of Reeds Lake has filed suit in Kent County Circuit Court against the Woodcliff Park Association concerning access to Bonnell Park.

The Friends group, consisting of about a dozen active members, claims that people have been run off of about 20 acres of wetlands at the east end of Reeds Lake, even though it is public land.

The group maintains the website friendsofreedslake.org, and its Facebook page has 80 members.

Kevin Cook, a member of the Woodcliff Park Association, said "We find it interesting that the individuals filing

this complaint have not identified themselves. They are hiding behind this entity that they have formed.

"They think the public has some right to this property. We disagree; we feel that the association has title by adverse possession.

"We do plan to vigorously defend our position as an association. When we do find who the individuals are, we plan to have our attorneys take deposition from each and every one."

A document from 1911 indicates John Bonnell donated the land to an entity called the Grand Rapids Boulevard Association for the benefit of the public. The land was later signed over to the township, which still owns it. Records show the association owns 28.7 feet of frontage.

"This is all public property, according to the surveys and the property descriptions," said Michael Dantuma, attorney for Friends of Reeds Lake.

But the association has established a parking lot, marina, kayak stations, a fire pit, picnic tables, a swing set and a "No Trespassing" sign in the park.

SEE PARK, A4



PRESS FILE PHOTO

A4 TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2010

PARK SUIT FIGHTS PRIVATE USE OF LAKESIDE LAND

CONTINUED FROM A3

An entryway is locked and gated.

Dantuma made a request in July under the Freedom of Information Act to the township for any information concerning authorization for the association to use the property or permits for improvements or establishing a marina. In August, Supervisor Michael DeVries responded that no information is on file at the township.

"It's not that they shouldn't use the park," Dantuma said of the association. "They probably shouldn't put their stuff all over public property and keep other people out. Basically, they should move their stuff back to their property.

"I'm sure it was a simple situation that has just basically crept out over the years. They've treated it as their own. I would not be surprised if there are many of the members who actually believe that's their property."

If there is documentation proving that the land was sold to the association at some point, The Friends of Reeds Lake will withdraw the complaint, he said.

DeVries said the township doesn't plan to operate the park, and looking into the issue would require time and research.

"This is something that's gone on for 90 years," DeVries said.

So far, association representatives have not responded to requests to show proof that they have the right to use the land.

Dantuma said nothing was found in a deed search. The association has 21 days to respond to the complaint.

The Friends group wants the court to require the association to remove all its items, including the gates and locks, prohibit members from interfering with use of the park, and to pay the Friends' costs and attorney fees.

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Groups battle over use of land owned by township

Suit filed against association for Reeds Lake beach

BY IAN HOLST
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The quest to open a secured beach park to the public has gained some momentum since a group calling themselves Friends of Reeds Lake recently filed suit against the Woodcliff Park Association – at least on social network sites.

An organization page on Facebook has approximately 90 friends, but the official website – www.friendsofreedslake.com – has only a handful of comments.

The first indication that some residents were unhappy that they were being denied access to a picnic and beach area, commonly thought to belong to the Woodcliff Park Association, was a complaint levied at Grand Rapid Township offices last spring.

The unnamed complainant wanted to know why he had been kicked off township property and why the park association was allowed to maintain a private beach on government land.

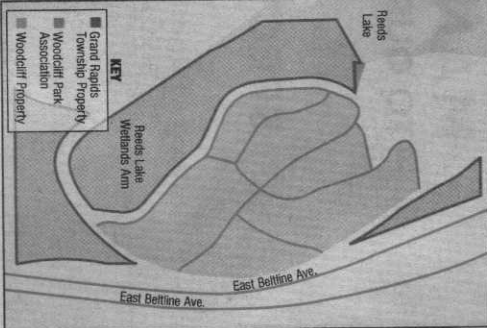
Grand Rapids Township does hold title to a large portion of the wetland arm on the south east side of Reeds Lake as well as a couple of other parcels near Reeds Lake.

Although Woodcliff Park Association owns a small triangular piece of land accessing the water, most of the portion fenced off by the association is located on land owned by Grand Rapids Township.

“We know we own the property and have put millions of



East derailed Greenville, see page 12.



A small beach park located on this portion of Reeds Lake is the subject of a legal complaint.

East Precinct investigating break-ins of businesses

The East Precinct of the Kent County Sheriff's

with one reporting the loss of a computer and the other saving