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Supervisors approve contract for work in White's Woods

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At its meeting Wednesday night, White Township's board of supervisors approved a \$20,000 contract with Millstone Land Management LLC for the first phase of an overhaul of 50 acres of the White's Woods Nature Center.

Pending any needed approvals from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and/or Indiana County Conservation District, removal of invasive plant species is planned.

It would be followed by a second phase where removal would be accompanied by the use of what township manager Milt Lady called an "environmentally friendly herbicide."

Millstone's Mike Lawer restated his intentions for White's Woods. He said it doesn't include traditional logging but rather to establish forest health, aesthetics and safety.

However, the work isn't meeting with the approval of Friends of White's Woods, a citizen group that insisted that the township acted in secret and should have explicitly held public hearings regarding its plans.

"It is a violation of public trust," said Robert Lambert, an attorney who is on the FWW board and was in attendance along with FWW President Sara B. King and Vice President Andrew C. Davis.

"We believe it is a requirement that the township issue public notices of their plans to review projects of major import such as White's Woods," Lambert said.

Board members contend that issues involving Millstone, a township consultant on removing invasive species, are treated the same way any other major township project is treated, such as road or sewer matters.

"Our meetings are public," Supervisor Sandi Gillette said. "It was all open and above board. If you want to know what will happen at these meetings, come."

Board Chairman George Lenz said he thought any further public airing of the matter would be redundant, saying "the only way I would support a public hearing at this point is if DCNR requested us to have one."

The timing of the work also was a topic of discussion. Supervisor Rich Gallo said, "This is the time of year when we should be doing this. You want to get ahead (of invasive growth). I think there has been enough research done."

"They painted the picture that timing was critical for them," Lambert said. "They could have initiated this part of the plan or at least noted this for public comment many months ago."

Among those participating over a conference call was township resident Joel Royer, who said "I am quite in favor of WW remaining as it is," as an old-growth forest, the way he thought it had been for "hundreds of years."

Township supervisors countered that White's Woods is a third-generation forest, on land that had been purchased from the old Rochester & Pittsburgh Coal Company.

It wasn't all a matter of sides being at loggerheads. Lambert said he and Davis met with Lawer after a lengthy public session before the board of supervisors went into executive session.

"We learned quite a bit," Lambert said. "He has agreed to cooperate with us, to meet with us, to review matters with us. He would be happy to meet with and review his plan with one or more foresters that we would retain."

After a lengthy discussion of White's Woods, the supervisors moved on to other issues, including the opening of bids for limestone and anti-skid material for township roads and gasoline and diesel fuel for township vehicles.

Lady opened the bids and turned them over to solicitor Matthew Ross and road foreman Tim Willis to review. The board is expected to vote on those bids next month.

The board did vote to make a one-time contribution of \$5,000 to the Indiana County Community Action Program, on behalf of its multiple services that have been strained by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Calling the situation "unforeseen, unexpected," Gillette moved for the contribution, citing what she saw earlier this week, when she was involved in a drive by the Indiana County Republican Committee and the county's Trump Victory Team to raise food and money for ICCAP.

She didn't have a figure to offer, but Lenz told her, "you will have to put an amount to it." Her fellow board members voted unanimously to make that donation.

The county's Democratic Committee and Food 911 also were involved in Monday's drive.

Lady said the township's annual spring yard waste collection will take place May 18-22. Township crews will travel along public roads, collecting branches, brush and garden waste.

Lenz opened the meeting recalling the memory of two township notables who passed away recently. Dr. C. William Lauver, 89, a former member of the Indiana/White Township Water Authority and chairman of the Indiana County Airport Authority, died April 16, while Eddie W. Frank, 82, a former road boss in the township, died April 9.

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