

White's Woods group pushes for land trust

By SAM KUSIC
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Friends of White's Woods, a group opposing White Township's forestry plan for White's Woods, has adopted a new strategy in its fight: If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

At a supervisors' meeting Wednesday, the group said it would take up supervisor George Lenz on his offer to work together on finding a land trust or a conservancy to buy White's Woods.

Lenz had suggested the idea last week, when the supervisors unanimously adopted the forestry plan.

Under the plan, a number of trees equivalent to 550,000 board feet would be cut down over 10 years.

A board foot is a plank equal to 1-inch thick and 1-foot square.

The trees to be felled are

dead, diseased or crowding out other trees.

The plan says the removal of those trees is necessary for the long-term health of the woods.

But Friends of White's Woods says the plan isn't so much a plan to maintain the woods as it is a plan to profit from it. The lumber to be taken from the woods has a current market value of \$166,000.

A sale, Lenz said, makes sense because a land trust or a conservancy is probably better suited to managing a large, wooded tract of land. And any sale could be made with conditions on how the land is used, he said.

In a letter to the supervisors, Friends of White's Woods said it thought a sale was a good idea and is "actively pursuing this option."

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"It is our belief that this creative solution would satisfy the concern of all parties," the group said in its letter, stating that it thinks a conservation-oriented group would be best able to ensure the woods is well managed. It asked the supervisors to hold off on implementing the forestry plan so that it could have time to work on a sale.

The supervisors, however, took no formal action Wednesday, saying they already agreed that they wouldn't immediately summon the lumberjacks.

Susan Dahlheimer, the group's acting chairwoman, said Friends of White's Woods wouldn't look to buy the woods itself. Rather, it is hoping to broker a deal between the township and a land trust or a conservancy, such as the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy or the Sierra Club.

"We don't want to be landowners," she said. "We want to make sure it is held by a group whose interest is in nature preserves and recreational use."

The group has had some preliminary discussion with such organizations, she said. But she said she wasn't a part of those conversations, and therefore couldn't comment on how they went.

Township manager Larry Garner, who said yesterday that he would look into a sale, said there are two major issues that

have to be considered — how much the township would sell the woods for and whether it even could.

The township had purchased White's Wood through a state grant program that paid half of the cost. As a condition of the grant, the township is limited in what it can do with the woods.

But if the idea doesn't come to fruition, Friends of White's Woods said it would take legal action to stop the township from implementing the plan.

Laurence Kruckman, a member of the group, claims the township ran afoul of the state's Sunshine Act, the open records and meetings law, because it improperly advertised a public hearing held before the supervisors voted to adopt the plan. Kruckman said he thinks a meeting notice wasn't posted at the township building and that a published advertisement wasn't properly worded.

But Cindy Garritano, township secretary, said the ad was written in accordance with the law, giving the time, date, location and purpose of the meeting. And, she said, it was published five days prior to the meeting, more than the 24-hour notice the law requires.

In any event, Kruckman said the group is, for the time being, going to overlook that issue so they can pursue a sale.

"If this avenue collapses, there are other avenues open to us," he said.