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METRO DETROIT

## Sides clash over land's possibilities

Commerce Twp. residents see rare open space, but DNR looks to sell

May 18, 2006

**BY MARYANNE GEORGE**  
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

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When Randy Ston gazes over the 570 acres of woods and open fields along Wise Road in Commerce Township, he sees a rare piece of open space that needs protection in a rapidly growing community.

But the state Department of Natural Resources says the land, which it values at \$14.5 million, is surplus and should be sold. Officials say the land has limited recreational value and is plagued by illegal activity from paintballers and off-road vehicles that account for the highest number of law enforcement complaints on state land in southeast Michigan, DNR spokeswoman Mary Dettloff said this week.

Located about two miles east of the 3,400-acre Proud Lake State Recreation Area, the parcel on Wise Road, between Carroll Lake and Union Lake roads, is managed as part of the larger recreation area. But it is not an active recreational site, and the state does not have the funds to develop it, Dettloff said.

Selling the land, about one-third of which is wetlands, would raise money to buy more suitable properties for recreation in southeast Michigan, she said. But the property is ringed by homes, and residents such as Ston, who is chairman of Save Our State Land, a group of residents and



[ZOOM](#)

Randy Ston, 62, of Commerce Township, left, and Kirt Manecke, 44, of Milford talk Tuesday while at the land that the Michigan Department of Natural Resources wants to sell to developers. Both are against the sale. (Photos by ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press)

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environmentalists, have voiced objections.

"The sale of this land could mean the loss of recreational land that forms the identity of the township," said Ston, 62, who lives across the road from the property.

The debate over the future of the land comes at a time when the state is reviewing the fate of 4.5 million acres of land it owns. Since the process began last year, the DNR has reviewed land in 40 of the state's 83 counties and identified 14,437 acres it wants to keep and 6,075 acres it wants to sell.

The Legislature is considering two bills that would tighten regulations governing the sale of state land. The bills include provisions that would require legislative approval, public notice and a public hearing before the sale of certain tracts of park and wilderness lands. The bills passed the Senate unanimously in March and are now in the House Conservation, Forestry & Outdoor Recreation Committee. No hearings have been scheduled yet to move the bills out of the committee.

Tonight, members of Save Our State Land will meet at the Multi-Lakes Conservation Club to discuss ways to preserve the land, Ston said. The public is invited.

The Walled Lake School District wants to buy about 80 acres in the southeast corner of the site. DNR officials would not disclose the appraisal on that portion of the property.

The remaining 490 acres was appraised by the DNR for single-family residential use at about \$14.5 million, including a 10% transaction fee, according to documents obtained by the Free Press. Commerce Township Supervisor Tom Zoner said the township wants to buy the land, but at a more favorable price.

In an attempt to preserve the land, the Commerce Township Board of Trustees rezoned the property last year from residential to public recreational district, Zoner said. The rezoning would also lower its market value, he said.

The state has given the township until August to make an offer on the land. A parks millage passed by township voters in 2004 will raise about \$7.7 million over 10 years, but the money was intended to improve the township's seven existing parks, Zoner said. Using the money to buy the state land would wipe out the proceeds of the millage.

The Wise Road property was purchased in 1945 using state fish and hunting license fees, said Ed Meadows, manager of real estate for the DNR's office of land and facilities.

The Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission also is in discussions with the DNR about the land.

Zoner said the state should negotiate with the township to preserve the open space. But state appraisers have defined single-family residential as the best use.

"The DNR should not sell us this property at retail value using taxpayers' dollars to repurchase public land," said Zoner, 62, who has lived in the

township since 1955.

Meadows said the DNR hopes to work with the township or Oakland County to preserve much of the property as open space.

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