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Laura Berman

State recreation area land sale may violate public's trust

Laura Berman /

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The scent of lilac perfumes the air. Pine needles crunch underfoot. A jogger and his dog trot steadily in the distance.

For now, this serene woods and marsh setting is Proud Lake State Recreation Area.

Soon, it could be Proud Lake Estates.

Oh, nobody wants this unspoiled parcel, with its Huron River frontage, and winding paths through a pine wood, to go subdivision.

Certainly not the state's Department of Natural Resources, our steward of parkland, which owns and has tended this park, smaller sibling to the better-known Proud Lake Recreation Area, four miles west, for 50 years.

But, these are difficult times, and the DNR wants to divest itself of land that doesn't fit its mission profile. And, so, the DNR issued its ultimatum, dated April 16: Commerce Township, the Oakland County municipality involved, has until late August to buy the 492-acre parcel for \$14.5 million.

Developers may buy land

If Commerce can't or won't cough it up, the state may auction it off to developers.

Local preservationists, such as Randolph Ston, of the Save Our State Land group, call the DNR's proposal an effort to "extort from Commerce Township." (The group is holding a public meeting tonight at 3860 Newton Road, Commerce Township.)

The township supervisor, Tom Zoner, who grew up on a farm in the township, is more diplomatic, but peeved.

The price is high, tweaked higher with a 10 percent commission -- "a transaction fee ... added to the purchase price," according to the state's letter.

The DNR's appraisal of the land's worth isn't based on the property's recreational value -- but on its "highest and best use" as single-family residential land.

While the state expresses its sincere interest in the park's preservation, it also asks that the township pay Piney Woods Trail prices.

The parcel is one of several pieces of parkland the DNR is selling. Because the Proud Lake parcel is adjacent to new subdivisions, hunting is not permitted -- and the DNR has pointed out that the land was originally purchased with hunting licensing fees for hunting. Ostensibly, money raised from the sale will buy other lands.

Parkland valuable to public

Well, maybe. But taxpayers are keenly aware by now that discrete pots of public funds often get used for general needs.

And parkland that's valuable to developers because it's located in areas of rapid growth, such as Commerce Township, is also especially valuable as parkland to its owners, the public.

Imagine if New York's mayor decided that, because Central Park is now worth billions, it should be relocated to upstate New York, where there would be more room for hunting *andsauntering*.

On Tuesday, Commerce Township responded to the state, offering about \$3 million to stave off the bulldozers and maintain the park.

That gives the DNR and Commerce Township -- two taxpayer-supported entities -- only 90 days to haggle about the park's future and the fair market price of the public's trust.

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