



Riverwoods Preservation Council

A group of resident volunteers
dedicated to preserving the ecological heritage of the community.

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September 22, 2009

Riverwoods Plan Commission
c/o David Niedelman, Chairman
300 Portwine Road
Riverwoods, IL 60015

Re: Fence Ordinance

Dear Plan Commissioners:

The goal is a balanced and healthful relationship between people and nature's life support systems. ... Conserve and enhance native trees and plants and other compatible vegetative cover, especially the woodlands. ... Nurture desirable and endangered wildlife and aquatic species, and enhance their habitats... .

(Riverwoods Comprehensive Plan. Adopted by the Board of Trustees on August 15, 2006)

We believe that the Village's Comprehensive Plan is the benchmark which the Plan Commission should be using in considering a fence ordinance. So far, the discussion appears to have focused on individual personal preferences, and ignores the underlying reason for deer fences: to protect the woodlands.

The Riverwoods Preservation Council (RPC) recommends that the Plan Commission not send a proposed fencing ordinance to the Board until the Village has developed an integrated approach to woodland protection. The legacy left by passing an onerous fencing ordinance will undermine the Village's Woodland Protection Ordinance, ecological provisions of the Riverwoods Comprehensive Plan and Village reforestation and invasives removal programs.

Protection of Woodlands

The term "deer fence" is a misnomer. It is more properly called a "woodland protection fence." The Village, like much of this country, suffers from an overabundance of deer. It is well-documented that deer are threatening the health of unprotected woodland areas. The Village has not acted to address the deer threat. Homeowners have been forced to take action.

Woodland Health Study

The recently-completed Woodland Health Study, partially funded by the Village, leaves no doubt that unprotected areas of our woodlands are unhealthy and under great stress. That conclusion was reached using nationally recognized standards employed by well-known experts. In unprotected areas, the woodland understory is minimal, likely the result of a combination of deer browse and closed tree canopy. Without an understory, the critical role played by the interrelationship and diversity of trees, other plants, insects, small mammals and birds is upended. Birds feed their young on a variety of insects. Insects depend on native wildflowers and other plants. Small mammals depend on native plants and insects. Predators such as owls and hawks depend on the presence of small mammals. A variety of trees produces a leaf mixture that determines soil chemistry and microscopic life upon which the flora and fauna depend. The Village's Comprehensive Plan recognizes that, as the fortunate stewards of these woodlands, it is our duty to protect and promote the healthy future of the local ecological system. Ignoring the interrelationship of species, and allowing the system to remain out of balance, threatens our natural habitat.

The RPC will present a summary of the Woodland Health Study to the Board of Trustees in October. A brief description of the Woodland Health Study results has already been published in the most recent Village Voice.

Deer "Channeling"

We've heard the argument that woodland protection (deer) fences channel or herd deer onto unfenced properties. This argument does not recognize the underlying problem in our woodlands: deer overbrowsing during the past decade has seriously damaged the native woodlands. The woodlands have been so thoroughly overbrowsed that channeling deer onto unfenced properties is unlikely to have a measurable effect on already degraded woodlands. In other words, putting up or taking down a woodland protection fence has a profound effect on the native vegetation within a protected property, but has little effect on native vegetation on nearby unprotected properties.

Of course, it is not only fences that channel deer. Barking dogs, supplemental deer feeding, turf grass lawns and non-native invasive plants also result in channeling of deer.

What Happens if Fences are Removed?

With regard to native plants, Riverwoods is a "desert." Native plants and oak saplings are far from abundant. Woodland protection fences, together with restoration efforts by owners of fenced properties, turn those deserts into more balanced and natural landscapes. If the woodland protection fences are removed or reduced, what would happen? The previously fenced properties would quickly revert to the degraded state of the unfenced properties due to deer browse. But there would be no counterbalancing improvement in previously unfenced properties. The deer population would ensure that all properties would be degraded.

Woodland Protection Ordinance

The Village's Woodland Protection Ordinance of 2005 is also a benchmark.

“In the village's woodland ecosystem, the canopy, understory and ground plane (herbaceous) levels each have characteristic species. ... The natural woodland ecology in the village is modified and pressured by human activity and development, the presence of deer herds, in particular, and other wildlife and insect populations, and the proliferation of non-native, invasive species such as buckthorn and garlic mustard. ... Since 1976, the village's woodlands have diminished in quantity and in the quality of the plant community as a result of the pressure factors that are described above. As a result, the village's woodlands have become more fragmented and have suffered a loss in the ability to regenerate the more desirable species of trees and plants of the native landscape... The maintenance of a healthy woodland environment in the village provides the following benefits: shade and cooling; control of erosion; filtering of water pollutants from stormwater; recharging of aquifers used by residents for drinking water; replenishment of the groundwater table; maintenance of flows into wetlands and streams; cleansing of air pollutants; mitigation of global warming by absorbing greenhouse gasses; and promotion of a biologically diverse community of micro-organisms, plants and animals, protecting some species from extinction while preserving genetic diversity. ... The preservation of woodland areas in the village will provide many essential benefits to the community as a whole, as described in the foregoing sections, and, accordingly, the adoption of a long-term policy of preserving woodland areas is necessary to safeguard, protect and promote the health, safety and welfare of the current and future inhabitants of the village and surrounding areas.”

It is clear that removal of woodland protection fences will not further the very sound policies reflected in the Village's Woodland Protection Ordinance.

Do Fences Actually Protect Woodlands?

There is little doubt that woodland protection fences work. The number of white trillium – an indicator species – is vastly higher within a fenced area and near locations where traffic or other factors keep deer away. In most areas frequented by deer, trillium is almost non-existent. Within two or three years after the installation of woodland protection fences, the woodlands begin to recover, often assisted by homeowners performing rehabilitation work such as the planting of native species. Trillium and oak saplings return.

Fencing Small Areas

One alternative some have discussed is allowing fencing less than six feet in height on small portions of properties. Such fencing – typically of welded wire – may be suitable for saplings and small, discrete areas. To be protective of the woodlands, the result is a multitude of small fenced areas, which increase fragmentation of the woodlands and do

not provide the large natural landscapes needed for significant areas of woodland regeneration and protection of many animals. If residents are forced to remove (or are not allowed to install) woodland protection fences, they are likely to fill their properties with a series of numerous welded wire fenced areas in an attempt to protect as much property as possible. Will the Village also restrict the number or location of small fenced areas residents may have on their properties?

Economics

The RPC's focus is environmental, not financial. We must point out, however, that studies have shown that healthy woodlands increase property values. Conversely, unhealthy landscapes tend to reduce property values.

State of the Woodlands

To the uninitiated, the Riverwoods woodlands may look healthy because they are green and lush. But appearances are deceptive. Much of the green is not a sign of health. It is the green leaves of old trees without the progeny of young saplings. It is the green of non-native plants that do not sustain native wildlife. It is the green of invasive plants that smother native species.

Riverwoods' woodlands are declining in health. Nature is out of balance, and one of the most significant imbalances is the overpopulation of deer. Protecting properties with fences is one way toward recreating balance. Fencing is not an ideal solution. But it is the only solution presently available to residents of Riverwoods who care about the health of their woodlands.

This situation is not unique in northern Illinois or nationally. Many scientifically valid studies, including those conducted in Lake County and the Chicago metropolitan area, have shown that deer overpopulation and overbrowsing have resulted in declining woodland health. This conclusion also is stated in a recent report by Chicago Wilderness, an alliance of more than 160 local, state and federal administrative agencies, municipalities, universities and non-governmental organizations working to protect, restore, study and manage natural ecosystems of the Chicago region. Chicago Wilderness includes organizations such as USEPA, USDA Forest Service, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Audubon Society and Lake County Forest Preserve. We would be happy to provide you with a copy of the Chicago Wilderness report.

Conclusion

Limiting woodland protection fences is extremely ill-advised and irresponsible unless those restrictions are part of a comprehensive woodland stewardship plan that will protect this community's woodlands. Restrictions without a well-considered plan call into question the dedication of the Village to protecting its woodlands, and the value of other Village programs such as the matching funds programs for reforestation and removal of invasive plants. If restored areas are not protected, such programs are destined to fail.

The RPC stands ready to participate actively with the Village and to help draw in the necessary expertise to develop a comprehensive woodland stewardship plan. We urge the Plan Commission to table the fencing ordinance until such time as it can be integrated into such a plan.

Our ... heritage is richer than just scenic features. ... Perhaps our greatest ... heritage is nature itself, with all its complexity and its abundance of life, which, when combined with great scenic beauty ... becomes of unlimited value.

(George Melendez Wright, a pivotal figure in the formulation of core values about stewardship of the natural world.)

Sincerely,

Riverwoods Preservation Council

cc: Mayor and Trustees of the Village of Riverwoods
Bruce Huvad, Esq.