



COOK COUNTY Forest Preserve District workers recently burned several piles of brush and trees which had been cleared from LaBagh Woods in the area south of Bryn Mawr Avenue.

A proposed ordinance which would prohibit the use of controlled burns to promote prairie growth in county forest preserves that are in the city appears to have died in a City Council committee.

## *Ban on prairie burning in city appears dead in City Council*

by BRIAN NADIG

A proposed ordinance which would prohibit the use of controlled burns to promote prairie growth in county forest preserves that are in the city appears dead.

"The law and environment departments are not pursuing it," said 41st Ward Alderman Brian Doherty, a sponsor of the ordinance. "It's not going anywhere. I don't believe it's going to get out (of committee)."

Doherty said that city agencies which have reviewed the proposal determined that the city lacks the authority to prevent the Cook County Forest Preserve District from con-

ducting prescribed burns, which are commonly used throughout the country to help promote the growth of native plants, particularly prairie plants. "The county trumps the city," Doherty said, adding that he feels that the matter should be studied further.

The City Council Committee on Energy, Environmental Protection and Public Utilities held a hearing on the proposed ordinance in September of 2007. Alderman Margaret Laurino (39th) and Alderman Patrick Levar (45th) also are sponsors of the ordinance.

Currently the county must receive waivers from the city Department of Environment to conduct the burns because a city ordinance bans the burning of vegetation outdoors. Doherty said that he has requested a copy of those waivers and that he plans to research whether the ordinance allows exceptions.

Doherty said he also is seeking to review copies of permits which the county has issued for the burns but that separate requests for the copies that both he and county Commissioner Peter Silvestri (R-9) made were denied. Doherty said that the county is requiring that a freedom of information request be filed in order to obtain copies of the permits,

which he said is unusual for public officials.

Doherty said that the county has been uncooperative on several issues since the use of prescribed burns resumed on the Northwest Side after a moratorium on burns which former county board president John Stroger imposed in 1996 was lifted in 2006 by interim board president Bobbie Steele.

Controversy over the burns began in the mid-1990s after some Northwest Side residents, who were unaware that controlled burns were being conducted in the area, called the Chicago Fire Department after they saw fires in the woods near their homes. The county now posts notices before the burns are conducted.

The moratorium lasted until 2001 throughout the entire county and for an additional 5 years for forest preserves on the Northwest Side, including Miami Woods, Bunker Hill, Oxbow Woods, Indian Road Woods, Yates Flatwoods and Sauganash Prairie.

Doherty said that he has met with groups on both sides of the burn issue and that his top priority is safety. He said that he believes that the burns are being conducted too

(Continued on Page 13)

*(Continued from Page 1)*

close to homes.

"My concern is burning near urban, residential areas," Doherty said. "I'm not here to debate the science of it. As I've always said, I don't know the difference between a daffodil and a dandelion."

Doherty said that the county has not lived up to an agreement that called for some of the trees that are cut down to be chipped instead of burned and for the county and residents to agree on a minimum distance to be maintained between homes and the burns. He said that in some instances the burns have been poorly supervised and that volunteers who conducted a burn have left the area while cinders were still smoldering.

Supporters of the burns feel that they are an effective way to stop the spread of invasive plants, such as

buckthorn, and to help release nutrients into the soil and that the burns restore the prairie or savanna which existed in the area before European settlement in the 1800s. The Chicago Park District conducts burns on some of its properties.

Opponents of the restoration practice say that in many instances healthy trees that are native to the area are cut down and that the herbicides which are used to kill tree stumps pose a threat to wildlife. They also question how prevalent prairie plant communities were in areas near the Chicago River which now are mostly wooded, and they argue that the smoke produced by the burns poses a health risk to residents.

Last week the county burned several piles of brush and trees which had been cleared from LaBagh Woods. Many acres of LaBagh Woods have been cleared in the past year, as restoration proponents say that non-native plants proliferated during the moratorium on work in the preserves.

The Urban Wildlife Coalition, which was formed by Northwest Side residents to fight the burns, has filed a complaint with the state environmental protection agency about some of the recent burns. Coalition director Bathsheba Birman said that the complaint charges that the county did not properly notify some home owners about the burns and that the burns pose health and safety threats to nearby residents.