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Future of Northwest Side woods divides environmentalists into 2 camps

Restoration of preserve near Sauganash divides concerned

By Ron Grossman

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Inside LaBagh Woods on Chicago's Northwest Side, it seems like the distance to a big-city neighborhood would have to be measured not in blocks but centuries.

Oak trees' wrinkled bark gives them the look of craggy sentinels. Thick stands of buckthorn screen off the outside world. Deer foraging along the Chicago River casually look up at the sound of human footsteps.

Certainly this is the primeval landscape that greeted the first European settlers to arrive here.

Or is it?

That question is being hotly debated in Sauganash, the neighborhood of stately homes and manicured lawns adjoining the woods.

It's an argument that divides environmentalists into warring camps—each armed with mental maps of what they are convinced this 150-acre section of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County looked like before there was a Cook County.

Those who worry that Illinois' Prairie State heritage is endangered argue that growing room must be provided for the wildflowers that dotted the prairies before being plowed into cornfields and subdivisions—even if it means clear-cutting bushes and trees, a process known as restoration.

Others are just as adamant about preserving northern Illinois' remaining islands of trees—like those that were beacons to pioneers from woodlands further east.

For a while, all those arguments were moot, as former Cook County Board President John Stroger placed a moratorium on restoration efforts in 1996. That round went to anti-burn activists. But in 2001, Stroger lifted the ban for some of the county's woods, and in 2006 interim board President Bobbie Steele ended it for LaBagh Woods as well.

This spring the hostilities resumed in earnest, with one side arguing that Mother Nature needs an occasional helping hand and the other saying: Don't interfere.

Forester John McCabe scoffs at the hands-off-the-woods faction. "That's not what they're doing with their own lawns," he said. "All we're doing is managing our lawns, so to speak."

McCabe, who works for the Forest Preserve District, is in charge of a woodland-management program that uses chain saws and fire to clear underbrush and what it dubs undesirable plant species from forest preserve lands.

To opponents, that's a contradiction in terms: If you cut down or burn something, where's the restoring?

"Remember the movie 'How Green Was My Valley'?" said Paula Fitzgerald, a partisan of the anti-restoration movement and a Sauganash resident. "This is 'How Burned Was My Valley.' "

As is often the case when passions run high, each side claims the rational high ground, accusing the other of being blinded by emotion.

"The vast body of science favors restoration," said Cook County Commissioner Mike Quigley, whose 10th District includes Sauganash.

"It didn't take me long to find out that restoration is not good science," countered Mary Lee Paoletti, who lives next to LaBagh Woods. A retired science teacher, she used to volunteer for forest preserve cleanup projects but said the experience caused her to switch sides.

Some people with similar tales to tell bill themselves as "recovering restorationists."

In the battle of endorsements, those on the side of restoration have the green-movement biggies. The Sierra Club and Audubon Society support controlled burns as a forest management method.

But the naysayers have support too: Trees for Life, Urban Wildlife Coalition, Natural Forest Advocates.

Quigley said LaBagh has to be cleaned of buckthorn and other invasive species that elbow out other plants, such as the prairie wildflowers he would like to see bloom again.

Paoletti is unconvinced.

"Didn't they ever hear of Darwin?" she said. Some species win, others lose; that's evolution, she said.

This spring, aldermen started hearing from constituents, among them Ald. Brian Doherty, whose 41st Ward is to the west of LaBagh Woods. He took a look and didn't like what he saw: Not just saplings but mature trees had been cut down, he said. To him, it seemed someone wanted to get the job done before political winds turned again.

Doherty tried bringing neighborhood activists and forest preserve officials together, but it's hard to find a compromise when both parties see themselves in the right. The alderman holds forest

preserve officials especially responsible for the impasse.

"I got the feeling they weren't being truthful with us, that they had an agenda," Doherty said. "They want to transform a forest into a savanna," or a grassy landscape with widely spaced trees.

Doherty also said he disliked the attitude expressed in the literature of the restoration movement, which he said called for stealth.

"They talked about secrecy," he said. "They said elected officials aren't smart enough to get it."

However the battle of LaBagh Woods comes out, Doherty noted, there is nothing like a neighborhood dust-up to provide politicians with continuing-education credits.

"Before this thing started," Doherty said, "I didn't know a dandelion from a daisy."

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