



Changing Landscapes: Finding a balance

By NICOLE WESKERNA - nweskema@shawmedia.com

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The Kenyon family hasn't sold a lot of land. But in 1996, selling 70 acres of land at Kenyon and North Barry roads in South Elgin to the Kane County Forest Preserve District seemed like the right thing to do, partly because the parcel contained wetlands.

"It's a good way of keeping the land land, not houses and asphalt," said Kane County Board member Mike Kenyon, R-South Elgin. "It's something that will be there for generations to come. If it got sold to a developer, we'd be looking at houses."

Development pressure during the past 15 years has caused county and municipal officials to look closely at what types of open space they want to preserve – and how to keep that land thriving.

Careful planning

Open space encompasses a variety of land, including forest preserves, farmland, retention ponds, bike trails, parks and athletic fields.

In Kane County, officials have made it a priority to maintain open space as development has increased.

There were more than 183,000 housing units in the county in 2011, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, up from 139,000 in 2000. And although development has been stagnant in recent years, county officials predict about 94,000 new households by 2040.

The population of the Chicago metropolitan region, which includes Kane County, grew 4.1 percent from 1970 to 1990, according to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. During that same time period, land devoted to residential use increased 46 percent.

From 1990 to 2010, the metropolitan area's population grew by 15.5 percent, according to CMAP, and residential land use grew "at an equally unsustainable pace."

Jim Eby, director of planning and development for the Batavia Park District, said that's why preserving open space is important. Fifty to 60 percent of the county is comprised of open space, and a county plan that outlines the future quality of life for residents commits to keeping 50 percent of the land with that designation.

"With open space, it's always important to balance that urban development and the sprawl that was happening so heavily in the '80s, '90s and 2000s," Eby said.

Developers' views on the importance of open space aren't much different.



Volunteers help March 23 with cleanup and removal of two Mulberry trees, which are considered invasive and not native to Eliss Woods Forest Preserve in Sugar Grove. (Sean King – For the Kane County Chronicle)



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Dave Patzelt, president of ShoDeen, wrote in an email that developers believe open space is a “critical ingredient” of any development plan.

Developers consider many aspects when it comes to open space, he wrote, including location, views, possible amenities and age. An older age group, for example, might enjoy a golf course, while a 5-year-old would prefer a playground.

Geneva’s Mill Creek community is an example of a place where the quality of open space outweighs the quantity, Patzelt wrote. Some parks are on just three-fourths of an acre, but provide a popular place for children to play and for parents to socialize, he noted. Walking paths, tennis courts, athletic fields and natural habitats are nearby, too.

Patzelt added that open space gives people choices about how they want to spend their time.

“Bigger is not always better,” he wrote. “Just like making good food, it is the balance of ingredients, not the quantity.”

Planning development around existing open space has become a cornerstone for Kane County government’s long-term development plan, which goes through 2040.

Karen Miller, executive planner with the Kane County Development Department, said developers are required to provide information about a site on which they wish to build, such as identifying wetlands. By comparing that information with a land-use map, county planners can work with developers to preserve land.

“We have a legacy in Kane County of understanding the importance of open space and creating a balance between land uses,” Miller said.

Now that the county has bought land to preserve – it’s gone from having 4,500 acres of forest preserves in 1999 to almost 20,000 acres today – the next step is connecting the pieces of land so plants and species can easily move from one preserve to another. County officials are in the process of mapping out areas of possible connectivity.

“This patchwork – creating little islands of open space – is a step in the right direction,” said Pam Otto, manager of nature programs and interpretive services at the Hickory Knolls Discovery Center in St. Charles. “Having those open spaces as connected as possible will maximize the habitat that would be available there.”



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Volunteer presence

To help take care of the county's open space, the Kane County Forest Preserve District relies on about 500 volunteers in a variety of areas, including environmental education and cleaning up wooded areas.

And more always are welcome, Volunteer Coordinator Robb Cleave said. There are more than 60 parcels of land, and only about 15 have an active volunteer presence.

The district has only about 70 employees, responsible for managing nearly 20,000 acres of land.

Last year alone, volunteers gave almost 10,000 hours of time to the forest preserve district. John Hoscheit, president of the Kane County Forest Preserve District Board, said one economic study showed volunteers add \$200,000 to \$250,000 in value to the district annually because they've helped the district operate efficiently.

"[Since 1999], we've grown by three or four times, roughly, but personnel has remained essentially the same," he said. "We've been able to operate it efficiently. That's where the volunteers come in."

Batavia resident Pat Hirschtick volunteered for the first time in late March at one of the restoration work days scheduled at forest preserves throughout the county. She said she's "big into conservation" and enjoys fishing the Fox River.

"I use the outdoors a lot. That's my playground," she said. "I'd like everyone to be able to appreciate it."

Volunteers are critical for removing invasive species not native to the area. Mary Ochenschlager, retired from the St. Charles Park District as assistant superintendent of natural areas and interpretive services, said one or two invasive species will "take off" and consume room, making it difficult for other plants to grow.

Cleave said volunteers usually work to remove garlic mustard, an invasive weed, along with brush. If those types of weeds are removed, ephemeral flowers can grow during the spring.

Geneva resident Dave Peterson said he has been volunteering at Fabyan East Forest Preserve about four months, helping to clear brush. He often uses the forest preserves to go hiking or biking, or to take a walk and look at wildlife.

"I get so much benefit from the forest preserve, it's nice to give back a little bit," he said.



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For the future

Kenyon said it breaks his heart to see unreserved land where once-towering oak trees have been felled. Preserving land now can maintain it for future generations.

"It's for ... the young people behind us," he said. "It helps the quality of life, and trees are good for ecology. It can't all be shopping malls."

Neal Anderson, who served as Campton Township supervisor from 2001 to 2009, said that township also saw the importance of having active open space. Preserving such space in Campton Township was a group effort, he said, noting that successful referendums to buy land proved that people were dedicated to saving land from urban sprawl.

"We wanted to save something forever," he said. "Our 1,500-plus acres, that will be open forever. It's something we can leave behind – a positive legacy we can leave behind for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

Learn more

The following are facts about Kane County Forest Preserve District volunteers:

- The Kane County Forest Preserve District actively manages about 500 volunteers.
- Last year, alone, volunteers logged 10,000 hours of work.
- The monetary value of volunteers totals \$200,000 to \$250,000 annually.

Source: Kane County Forest Preserve District