

County stays in bidding for park land

By Steve Gunn

sgunn@muskegonchronicle.com

Muskegon County commissioners are enticed by the idea of purchasing 91 acres of undeveloped property in White River Township to add to Meinert County Park.

But not for the listed price of \$819,000, based on the price tag of \$9,000 per acre.

Several commissioners, when asked Tuesday to approve an application for a state grant to help pay for the property at that price, seemed ready to pass on the entire idea.

It was only when a compromise was offered, seeking a state grant that would only pay \$273,000 based on the an assumed value of \$6,000 per acre, that commissioners relented.

Now they will wait and see if an earlier request for a federal grant of \$475,000, plus their request for a state grant of \$273,000, are both approved. That would provide \$748,000 toward the purchase of the land, somewhat short of the price tag.

If either grant request is rejected, the park expansion plan is likely dead for at least a year. If both are approved, negotiations with the property owners can begin.

If the property owners want more than the county has in grant money, fundraising can be done to raise the difference, according to officials.

In the meantime, by applying for the DNR grant Tuesday, even at a lesser amount, com-

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missioners kept the hope of park expansion alive.

It's been two months since a representative from The Trust for Public Land Preservation visited the county board and suggested the purchase of the 91 acres of undeveloped property to the south of Meinert County Park from two private trusts.

According to the plan presented to commissioners, the Trust for Public Land would purchase the property and hold it until the county receives the necessary grant funds to buy it and add it to the park. No county money would be spent on the purchase.

Commissioners seemed interested, until they decided the owners of the property were asking too much at \$9,000 an acre.

According to White River Township Trustee Holly Hughes, about 67 acres have been assessed for tax purposes at around \$6,000 apiece, while roughly 24 acres have been assessed at roughly \$10,000 apiece.

So when a motion was offered Tuesday, asking commissioners to apply for a Michigan Department of Natural

Resources Land Trust Fund grant for \$404,000, several commissioners balked.

That amount was based on the asking price of \$9,000 per acre, plus miscellaneous expenses.

"That's ludicrous," said Commissioner John Snider. "By our own action we would be shooting ourselves in the foot."

But Hughes, representing White River Township on the issue, asked commissioners to reconsider.

She noted that the county had a rare opportunity to acquire land for park expansion from a willing seller. She told commissioners they could go ahead and apply for a grant and, in the end, if they feel the sale price is too high, they could refuse the state dollars and back out of the deal.

Hughes also noted that the DNR requires two property value appraisals before grants are approved, and said those appraisals would go a long way toward determining the true value of the land.

"The two appraisals will give you the opportunity to negotiate with the landowners," Hughes said.

Commissioner Don Aley

suggested negotiating with the owners first, then applying for the grant. That way the county could seek an accurate amount of grant money, he said.

Commissioner Bob Scolnik said he wasn't sure how to vote on the proposal to seek the \$404,000 grant.

"I feel like I'm being pushed into a corner on the price," Scolnik said. "If I vote no, I'm a bad guy. If I vote yes, I'm financially irresponsible. I don't know what do to."

Finally Hughes suggested applying for a smaller grant from the DNR, based on the assumption that the 91 acres are worth \$6,000 apiece.

If more money is eventually needed to complete the deal, local organizations like the Community Foundation for Muskegon County could help make up the difference, and no state grant money will be spent beyond the \$6,000 per acre cost, Hughes said.

Commissioners went for that idea, approving a DNR grant request for \$273,000 by a 9-0 vote, with Commissioner Bill Gill abstaining. That amount was determined by multiplying the 91 acres by \$6,000, then dividing the total in half.