

CARITY LAND CORPORATION

HOME PAGE

OUR DEVELOPMENTS

THE CARITY PROCESS

HOW TO BUY A LOT

NEWS AND PRESS

CARITY LAND CORPORATION

12720 WEST NORTH AVENUE
BROOKFIELD, WI 53005

PH: 262.785.1968
FX: 262.785.1949

Rare prairie reroutes development plans

By ANNYSJA JOHNSON
Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: July 30, 2003

Franklin - There is a joke among environmentalists in Franklin that some developers like to name their subdivisions after the natural resource they destroy.

You know, "Winding Creek This" or "Ancient Oaks That."

And then there are folks such as Bill Carity, the Brookfield developer who has spent the past three months redrafting plans for a 70-acre Franklin subdivision in an effort to preserve one of the last remaining vestiges of Milwaukee County's pre-settlement landscape.

That plan is in jeopardy now as a debate ensues over what's more significant: a rare prairie remnant, overgrown with brush but never touched by the plow, or three wetlands.

In the end, the Franklin Common Council will decide whether Carity's "Prairie Grass Preserve" rises or falls. But the debate raises questions about how environmental features are valued and inequities in the law that protect some land features at the expense of others.

"The irony is we have all sorts of regulations that protect the tiniest wetland, even if it's seriously degraded. But you could have a really unusual, high-quality wood lot, or a prairie remnant, that's afforded no legal protection at all," said Jim Reinartz, a plant and wetland ecologist who directs the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's field station in the Town of Saukville.

"We're lucky to have someone who is interested in working on this," Reinartz said. "He could destroy that prairie tomorrow if he wanted to."

Prairies covered landscape

There was a time in the 1800s when lush prairies and stately oak savannas dominated the landscape in southern Milwaukee County, south into Illinois and west to the Great Plains.

Tall grasses - so high one would have to sit on horseback to see over them - undulated in the Lake Michigan breezes. Their colors and textures, and the abundance of wildflowers in bloom, lent a drama to the landscape that is unseen today.

They were sustained by fire, natural and man-made, that blackened and warmed the earth, speeding the rebirth in spring of their deep-rooted plants, Reinartz said.

"Some of it was lightning, but most of the prairie fires in Wisconsin before European settlement were set by Native Americans to protect their settlement against wildfires and improve hunting," he said.

By the turn of the 20th century, most of these fertile lands, among the richest in Wisconsin, gave way to farms. The fires ceased and the blade of the plow



Bill Carity has revised his development plan after discovering an unplowed virgin prairie in the middle of his proposed subdivision. "I do have a heart toward preserving this prairie," he said.

ripped through the roots.

By 1990, according to the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission, less than 1% of Milwaukee County's prairies, a meager six acres, was known to exist. All of the oak savannas were gone.

UWM's Reinartz was charting the wetlands on Carity's site off St. Martins Road in May when he wandered into a secluded area, pocked with wetlands and thick with brush, and noticed something unexpected.

"I started to see these prairie plants - Shooting Star, and some of the grasses, like big and little blue stem and prairie cord grass," Reinartz said.

"They were sort of scattered throughout an area where some invasive shrubs had taken over. And the more I saw . . . the more I suspected that this had never been plowed," he said.

To be certain, Reinartz called in biologists Don Reed and Larry Leitner, who surveyed the plant community and studied the soil beneath. More than 40 prairie species were found in all. And beyond the presence of those plants, a cutaway of the soil showed no telltale shift in soil texture where the plow would have reached.

Reed and Leitner confirmed what Reinartz suspected. There, in the southwest corner of Carity's planned subdivision, sat as much as 11 acres of virgin prairie.

"It was very exciting," Reinartz said. "It's a significant find."

Environmental value

Bill Carity has been turning farmland into subdivisions in Waukesha County for 35 years. And like a growing number of developers, he's figured out that preserving environmental features, such as dense woodlands and meandering creeks, often increases the value of his developments. So he's learned to work around them.

But even Carity was unprepared for what Reinartz had found, or the response from scientists and environmentalists.

"These environmentalists down there, they think we've found the holy grail," said Carity, who agreed to try to save the prairie, as long as he didn't have to give up any of his lots.

So far, Carity estimates he's spent about \$50,000 in engineering and other costs to revise his plat. And he's agreed to place the prairie in a land trust that can restore and manage it.

Carity's most significant change has been to reroute one of the interior roads away from the prairie. But to do that, he has to fill a portion of one larger wetland; and fill all or part of two others, about a half-acre each in size and deemed of poor quality by the Franklin Environmental Commission and the state Department of Natural Resources.

Those groups, both proponents of strong wetland protections, support the move. The chance to save the rare prairie remnant, they say, outweighs the benefits of these isolated wetlands, so degraded they've lost much of their plant diversity and their value as groundwater filters and habitats for wildlife.

Heidi Hopkins, a water management specialist with the DNR, sees it as "a trade-off" her agency is willing to make.

"Do you preserve this nice prairie in an area of the state where they have steadily declined, or smaller, lower-quality wetlands that until a couple of years ago probably had row crops in them? I would argue the prairie is more valuable."

But Franklin Planning Manager Mary Kay Buratto, who has tangled with the Environmental Commission since coming to the city in December, is opposed. She says Franklin's newly toughened wetland ordinance, pushed by the commission over her objections, doesn't differentiate by quality.

"My concern is, if we tell Mr. Carity he can fill in his wetlands, what's to stop the next person from coming in, whether he has a prairie or not?" Buratto said. "The way I see the ordinance, he has two choices: get rid of four lots or go

through the prairie."

Carity said he's uncertain how he would respond if handed that ultimatum. "What I've said is that I want to come out whole on this thing - it is a business after all," he said. "But I do have a heart toward preserving this prairie."

Prairie vs. wetlands

It's hard to overstate the social and ecological values of a wetland. But making a case for a patch of prairie - too small to serve as any significant wildlife habitat and on prime land for agriculture or development - is much tougher, according to Reinartz and others.

They see the remnants as priceless because of their link to Wisconsin's natural past, their contribution to the Earth's diversity and the secrets they may hold as an unstudied ecosystem.

"We've never had the opportunity to really research all of the functions of these plants, how they process chemicals or fight off pests" Reed said. "Until you can build that library, you don't really know what potential they might have for medicines or products in the future to help mankind."

That's why it's so important to preserve these "little postage stamp habitats," he said, "whether they be prairie or wetland or any other kind of native plant community."

To not try is to usher in their extinction, the prairie advocates say. It's a fate unthinkable for some species, from whooping cranes to the red colobus monkey, and completely disregarded for others.

"People don't understand the significance of plant life extinction, unless it's something like the sequoias," Reed said.

"You can make a case for the redwoods in California. But how do you make a case for shooting stars in Franklin, Wisconsin?"

It's a question that may soon have an answer: The city plan commission is expected to take up the matter in August.