

HighlandParkNews

Group promotes preservation over development

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If the economy turns around, home builders may be eyeing Lake County fields again.

The home builders' objective, of course, is profit -- but a group of conservationists advised Lake County leaders of their belief that the way to pull the most value from every property is to leave some properties undeveloped.

The Liberty Prairie Conservancy held a luncheon April 29 at the Peacock Restaurant in Vernon Hills to address the balance between developed and public spaces.

Beth White, director of the Trust for Public Land's Chicago office and the featured speaker, told an audience of business people and public officials that leaving room for parks, forest preserves, farms and other green spaces increases the value of properties that are developed, and can cost the public less to maintain.

"Land conservation is often placed in opposition to development," but White said that the two can compliment each other. "Conserving land may make more economic sense over the long term."

She supported this assertion with figures pertaining to property value, health-care costs, water quality and transportation needs.

The rap that governments give to open lands, she said, is that they generate no property or sales taxes, and are thus merely expenses. White asked her audience to think beyond a park's boundaries.

She referenced studies indicating that small parks in neighborhoods drive home values up and motivate the neighbors to exercise, thus driving health-care costs down.

"The United States is suffering from an epidemic of diseases related to obesity," White said. "When people have access to parks and natural areas, they're more likely to exercise."

Besides that, neighborhoods need police, firefighters, schools, sanitation and other public services -- parks need landscaping. White pointed to a 2004 nationwide study showing that for every dollar in tax revenue residential development garnered, the community spent \$1.16 to maintain it.

Of course, as White noted, the same study found that commercial development costs only 27 cents per dollar generated, making forests, parks and farms more expensive at 35 cents per dollar.

She added that Lake County is an ideal draw for commercial developments, especially high-end and high-tech businesses.

But to attract them, White said, open spaces will be crucial: Employees at those businesses want to live among green spaces.

"Quality of life is a huge factor," she said. "All the studies bear out the same findings."

They also indicate the importance of attracting retirees, White said: The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that by 2050, one out of four Americans will be over 65. The third-most-important priority for seniors looking for a new home, she said, was proximity to nature.

White noted with humor, however, that seniors' top priority is still a nice climate -- something Lake County will not offer until global warming finally takes effect.

Sarah Surroz, conservation and outreach manager for Liberty Prairie Conservancy, said there was plenty for government leaders and property owners to consider while they wait for the economy to rebound. Earlier in this decade, Lake County was paving over four acres per day, and the right balance must be planned for now, Surroz said, before the home builders get hungry again.

"It's very important for the county to keep a certain percentage preserved," she said. "This downturn will end at some point."