

Committee drops gun range proposal

By Lynn Van Matre
Tribune staff reporter

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A controversial proposal to build a gun range on DuPage County Forest Preserve District property has gone up in smoke after months of debate.

Commissioner Joseph Cantore, who heads a committee that has been studying the issue, said Tuesday that district staff had informed him that no suitable site could be found for a range because of noise and safety concerns and "incompatibility with natural resources."

Staff had been seeking a possible site since fall, when Cantore proposed the range on behalf of what he described as hundreds of area gun owners who wanted the district to add a range to its roster of outdoor recreational activities.

Many longtime DuPage County environmental activists immediately took aim at the proposal, arguing it was an inappropriate use of district land.

A few range opponents, including members of the Sierra Club and the Illinois Prairie Path, a non-profit corporation, showed up to reiterate their concerns at the public comment segment of Tuesday's commission planning session. "We are not opposed to gun ranges in general, but when citizens voted for open land referendums, they never thought that [forest preserve] land would be used for a gun range," Frank Orto, local Sierra Club executive chairman, told commissioners. Others who spoke against the proposal argued that a range would disturb wildlife, spoil the tranquility of the preserves and create liability issues.

In addition to Cantore, the special recreation committee appointed by district President "Dewey" Pierotti to study the proposal included Commissioners Roger Kotecki and Carl Schultz. At the committee meeting, Kotecki asked that members formally bring the matter to a close in view of staff's findings.

"Several of us have been accused of [wanting a shooting range]," said Kotecki, who earlier had expressed doubts about the district's ability to locate a site. "I would like to go on record saying we're not looking any longer."

Schultz suggested taking a vote on whether committee members concurred with district staff. It passed 3-0.

Committee members stopped short of deleting shooting ranges from a list of activities identified as tertiary possibilities in the district's recreation policy, which is undergoing revision. Kotecki said it might be possible that someone would donate land in an industrial area suitable for a range in the future.

Pierotti opposed the shooting range from the beginning, saying it was misleading to the public to put a range on land presumably bought to preserve open space.

"But we have an obligation to consider these things if someone brings them forward," Pierotti said Tuesday. "I don't want to make a decision like that behind closed doors."

Shot down

DuPage Forest Preserve District drops idea of shooting range

By Kristophere' Owens
staff writer

WHEATON — There is no place in the existing DuPage County Forest Preserve District system for a shooting range, a committee determined Tuesday.

Although some opponents of the controversial proposal are claiming a small victory, others feel the door isn't completely closed on the issue.

"The controversy is still going to go on," Ruth Najacht of Wheaton said. "It's still open-ended."

The Special Committee for Recreational Activities — composed of commissioners Joe Cantore, R-Oakbrook Terrace; Roger Kotecki, R-Carol Stream; and Carl Schultz, R-Aurora — reached its decision after learning from the district staff that there's no suitable site for a shooting range.

Cantore, the committee's chairman, also dispelled some false information he and other commissioners have heard about the district's intention to put a shooting range in Greene Valley Forest Preserve in Naperville.

However, shooting ranges do remain on an ordinance that establishes a district recreation policy. They are listed under "tertiary activities," which have a more limited appeal among people compared with golfing and fishing, but often have a strong special-interest support.

While Cantore was satisfied the staff's recommendation was enough to put the matter to rest, Kotecki motioned for a vote to concur with the recommendation and remove shooting ranges from the recreation policy.

Doing so would eliminate perceptions that the district is still actively looking for a site, Kotecki said. He added a land donation like an industrial park to the district could revive the issue.

Mike Palazzetti, the district's director of land management, defended the policy, saying it lists examples of activities that fall under primary, secondary, tertiary and prohibited categories. The policy's intent isn't to say whether those activities will or will not happen, he said.

The committee chose to concur with the staff recommendation, but not to remove shooting ranges from the policy. As for the policy, that could be considered by the district board in two weeks.

Frank Orto, executive chairman of the River Prairie Group of the Illinois chapter of the Sierra Club, chalked the decision up to politics and considered it a compromise.

"We won today," he said, promising the club — which has 2,800 members in DuPage County — will keep an eye on the issue.

Orto told the commissioners, who met before the committee meeting, that the club isn't opposed to a shooting range unless it is in a forest preserve or land adjacent to it.

"Right now, they're not considering it anywhere," he said.

Najacht said shooting ranges should have never been considered by the committee because it's not in the district's mission. Don Evans of Darien, who's running for a seat of the Forest Preserve District Commission, agreed.

"It's a shame that so much time and district resources have been wasted on this issue," he told the board.

Schultz, who approved leaving shooting ranges in the policy, told opponents he would support them only if they don't interfere with the environment, surrounding neighbors and animals and don't create noise problems.

Kotecki feels the matter is closed.

"It's hard to imagine a site that will work in our county," he said, adding the county is too developed to accommodate a shooting range.

He also thinks no one would donate land to the district for that purpose.

Kotecki said the idea of a shooting range varies greatly from an archery range the district has operated on a trial basis since April 15 at Blackwell Forest Preserve near Warrenville. He said the archery range, on the southwestern base of Mount Hoy, is a quieter activity and creates a negligible environmental impact compared with the jarring noise of a rifle.

Forest preserve gun range out of district board's sights

By Marni Pyke Daily Herald Staff Writer
Posted Wednesday, June 23, 2004

DuPage County Forest Preserve commissioners Tuesday shot down the idea of locating a gun range on district land.

Staff members who had been studying the idea told members of the district board's recreation committee that the range doesn't fit with the existing forest preserve concept.

"There's just not a place for it right now," Commissioner Joseph Cantore of Oakbrook Terrace said.

He added that concerns about noise from a shooting range and compatibility with the forest preserves' mission were factors in the decision.

After a brief debate about whether it was necessary, committee members voted to agree with the staff recommendations.

That action came at the request of Commissioner Roger Kotecki of Carol Stream, who asked to clear the air about the controversial issue after being accused of having a personal agenda in favor of the gun range.

"I'd like the opportunity to go on the record that we did not find a suitable site," Kotecki said.

"There's a lot of false information floating around," Cantore said. He added that the district looked at the issue at the request of residents.

"We looked at it as we would look at anything, like a baseball field," Cantore said.

Prior to the vote, several people told officials that a shooting range would be harmful to wildlife living on forest preserves and disruptive to visitors.

"Forest preserve lands are designated as open space and they should stay that way," said **Woodridge** resident Lynn Rotunno.

Connie Schmidt, who lives in Warrenville and belongs to the Sierra Club, objected to the agenda listing the subject as an "outdoor sports facility" rather than a gun range.

"I think this is misleading to constituents," she said. "We're depending on you to let us know what's going on."

Frank Orto of the Sierra Club's River Prairie Group said he and others campaigned to pass a land acquisition referendum in 1997 for the forest preserve and never dreamed district property could be used for a shooting range.

"We don't want to disturb the serenity of the forest preserve lands," he said.

After the meeting, several people said they were troubled by the district allowing shooting ranges to remain as a possible activity in a recreation policy passed Tuesday by committee members.

"I'd like permanent closure on this issue and I don't feel I've got it now," Rotunno said. However, Orto added, "It's a compromise. That's what politics are all about."