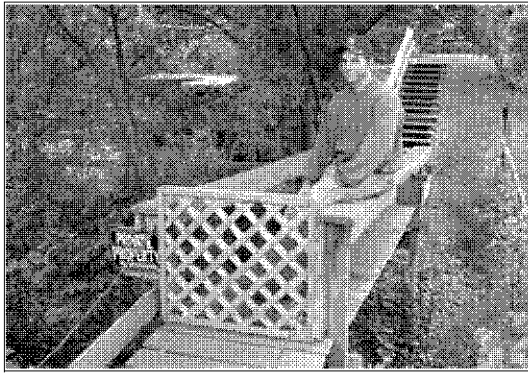


Pact allows Woodridge man to keep bridge



By Don Grigas, staff writer
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WOODRIDGE, IL -

In a few weeks Mark Filipiak and his father Raymond will walk across a wooden foot bridge behind their Woodridge home and begin turning soil in their family's vegetable garden. By the end of summer they hope to begin reaping a harvest of beets, green beans, tomatoes and other produce.

Until last week, however, they were unsure they would ever perform their annual spring ritual, a labor of love that began when Raymond planted the first family garden in 1972.

During an April 10 Woodridge Park District Board meeting, commissioners approved a long-awaited license agreement with Raymond Filipiak to allow the bridge to remain intact behind their home at 6417 Winston Drive.

"We are happy we can continue to use the bridge," Mark said. "We'll be out there by the second week of May tilling the soil and starting to plant in the garden again once the soil is dry enough."

The two parties began negotiating an agreement more than a year ago after the Park District notified some area residents that foot bridges spanning a shallow tributary draining into Prentiss Creek would have to be removed.

Mark and Ray Filipiak immediately appealed to the Park District to allow the bridge to remain.

Over the course of the negotiations the Park District waived two deadlines and granted extensions to the family so necessary paperwork could be submitted.

Last week all the paperwork was in place, and both parties ratified the agreement.

For several months the Filipiak family agonized over the possibility of losing the bridge, Mark said.

"The bridge and the garden have been in the family for more than 30 years, and removing the bridge would have meant we could not have access to the garden," Mark Filipiak said. "Every year our family comes home and cans beets grown in the garden, and we want to keep that tradition going."

According to the agreement the bridge can remain intact on the site as long as the residence is owned by Raymond or a member of the Filipiak family, based on certain conditions.

Among the conditions spelled out in the agreement is a requirement that Filipiak provide a letter written by a structural engineer to the Park District each year certifying the bridge is structurally sound.

In addition, Filipiak must insure the bridge for \$1 million and show proof of insurance each year.

The cost will be about \$750 annually, a price Mark said the family is willing to pay.

"It is worth it to me ... but there really was no other choice given to us," said Mark Filipiak.

Initially the Park District requested an insurance policy worth \$3 million, but lowered the requirement after the Filipiak's homeowner's insurance agent spoke with park officials.

"All my friends are calling it the Million Dollar Bridge now," the younger Filipiak said.

The family also must notify the district whenever repairs or modifications are made to the foot bridge.

Park officials said they never wanted to be portrayed as bad guys, but had to look out for the best interests of the entire district and all of its taxpayers.

“The reason we negotiated this in the first place was the Park District does not allow private use of public land in this way,” said Mike Adams, director of parks and recreation for the Woodridge Park District.

“We obviously would have preferred not to have this situation, but because of the unique nature of the history of the bridge, the board agreed to allow this bridge to remain where it is under certain conditions that protect all of our residents,” Adams said.

Fred Hohnke, president of the Park Board, said the district needed to be indemnified against potential law suits.

“In case of a large judgment, liability is the key issue,” Hohnke said.

Two other foot bridges along the same creek near the Filipiak home have been removed over the past year, Adams said.

Although park officials knew of the bridge when it was first built 34 years ago, the district never sought to remove the bridge until early 2006 when DuPage County engineers reviewed the creek as part of a storm-water management project.

According to a county storm-water ordinance, bridges built over creeks used for storm-water management are considered illegal structures, but because the Filipiak bridge was built prior to enactment of the ordinance, the bridge “was grandfathered in,” Adams said.

When the negotiations first began, park officials told the Filipiak family obtaining right of way from the Park District was not an option, and a license agreement was the only way the family could maintain the bridge.