

Sumner talks county's floodplain management options

By *Tristan McGough*
Special to the Reporter

With over 120 floodplain buyout properties now owned by Jefferson County and managed by its Park Department, the county has been seeking input from community residents regarding what should be done with the recently—and rather reluctantly—acquired low-lying lands along the Rock River.

Town of Sumner Clerk Glendan Rewoldt had attended the Park-sponsored idea-gathering session on Oct. 25, 2017, entitled "Use and Management of Floodplain Buyouts in Jefferson County." Her report at Sumner's regular board meeting on Nov. 13, 2017, caused some controversy.

Billed as a 'workshop,' Rewoldt was immediately off-put by the lack of designation of the Town of Sumner on the "Black Hawk Island Rd & North Shore Area" map used in the presentation, though the Town of Koshkonong was clearly named.

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"Of the 122 total properties acquired by the county," Rewoldt conveyed, "ninety-six are in the Town of Sumner, and yet no mention was made of that."

It seemed to her that with roughly 79 percent of the distressed properties lying within Sumner Township, democratic fairness would allow the town a significant say in how the properties might be utilized for public and/or private purposes; however, without even so much as a mention, Sumner seemed dismissed out of hand. Most would surmise a typographic misadventure had occurred.

It wasn't until Rewoldt continued to press the issue before the actual presentation began, moving up the chain-of-command to Park Director Joe Nehmer, where she, finally, got recognition to her claim. The speaker ended up not only verbally correcting the map and calling attention to the volume of mitigated properties within Sumner, Rewoldt was handed a public apology for any mistake and misunderstanding made.

Rewoldt estimates that around \$14 million has been lost as a tax base to the township, now that the county owns the land with shorelines along the identified and expanded floodplain of the Rock River.

"And," the clerk notes, "even if the town still owned the land, there would be no new buildings going up to offset any financial loss."

So, the county is asking, just what should be done with these 122 properties?

Jefferson County District 30 Supervisor Gary Kutz was at the park's meeting and in attendance Monday evening at Sumner's town hall.

"One of the suggestions I've

made," Kutz said, "is that neighbors could lease the land, maybe for a dollar a year, with the restriction that they would have to maintain it."

That's one of many ideas that were floated at the park's meeting in October, along with others, such as using the floodplain land for occasional camping or public use, like embarking in a canoe or kayak. Another concept was to install a dock here and there, encouraging fishermen to use such easy access points to scenic rural settings.

With all the recommendations that were given, some were dismissed outright, such as the camping notion. "Where would you go with the 'brown' water?" Sumner resident Jack Sanders pointedly asked, offering some local levity.

Other suggestions brought a sense of umbrage to the board's table. None were particularly more irksome than the idea of the county leasing the mitigated land back to the townships, which, in turn, would have to come-up with acceptable uses for the land.

Sumner Chair John Dohner, Jr., asserted, "That should be the county's responsibility."

Rewoldt interjected, "Especially considering that no buildings can go up!"

The dilemma is aggravated by the prospect of 70 or more properties currently on the planned buyout list that are intended to be added to the 122 already mitigated; however, that may be a time in coming, since the buyout is funded by federal, state and county agencies. The feds and county are all set to fund the next phase, but the state is not yet ready, lingering, as it has been, in budgetary paralysis.

That said, Kutz believes that

it won't be until March or April next year that the county will have gathered enough public input and taken an analytic look at options before it hits committee for consideration.

Their deliberations may help resolve a continual problem in this area of the Rock River that has plagued shoreline properties since the 1920s. Even before that, in the last century occasional flooding of the area had been recorded.

According to the UNC Institute for the Environment's study on Jefferson County, "The worst flood occurred in 1929, when Rock River levels rose 6 feet above the flood

stage. Damage to properties was minimal due to a lack of properties located along the river. While most development in Jefferson County is located outside the 100-year floodplain, many homes lying near the river or lakes were constructed in the late 1940s, after the 1929 flood."

Major flooding again occurred in June of 1993, when rains were so heavy they caused water levels to rise by 10 inches shy of the '29 record. At that time, the report notes that "over \$1.5 million was awarded in federal and state grants to assist in recovery."

After the 2008 flooding in

southern Wisconsin, "causing significant damage to homes, businesses, and agriculture... Jefferson County alone received \$10 million in assistance through federal grants and loans. For all three of these flood events, a presidential disaster declaration was made, giving the county the opportunity to apply for federal assistance."

It's the county's hope that the now purchased properties will have some future use(s) that can accommodate an occasional flood. However, it is unlikely that Sumner will have anything to do with taking-on the responsibilities for maintaining these properties now re-

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turned to their natural state, having been systematically cleared of debris.

Dohner proposed, "Maybe it will take the Oneida Nation to solve the problem," suggesting "the Nation" purchase some of the land and develop it for commercial use.

He went on to conceptualize the "building-up" of Black Hawk Island (which, of course, is not a full island at all). Once the level of the land is elevated, a casino and accompanying complex could be erected.

And more to the point of town and county, the land could then re-become part of a much needed tax base for the area.