

Freedom Township Residents Host Free Water Quality Workshop for Local Government, Citizens

By Melinda Baird, melindathesuntimesnews@gmail.com

A portion of Freedom Township residents won't be sitting back, passively observing its precious water resources unwittingly threatened. Nor will it engage in antagonistic quarrels with the very officials it hopes to influence. Instead, the township's Pleasant Lake Property Owners Association with Citizens Respecting Our Waters (CROW) opted to organize a free, comprehensive workshop to educate elected and appointed officials and others about modern planning and zoning techniques used to protect lakes, streams, wetlands, and woodlands.

"Instead of creating hostility, we followed the religious principle of 'just show them the way,'" township resident Lon Nordeen said during the four and one-half hour Saturday, December 10 workshop at Freedom Township Hall.

The training was provided by Michigan State University Water Resources educator Monica Day, Huron River Watershed Council ecologist Kris Olsson, Washtenaw County Water Resources Commissioner Harry Sheehan and Washtenaw County Emergency Services Director Marc Breckenridge. Beside Freedom Township officials and residents, the forum drew local government representatives, environmental advocates and concerned citizens from as far as 100 miles away.

"The interest is more widespread than we ever imagined," resident Carol Westfall said.

Day began the workshop acknowledging 2016 as "a difficult year for water," referencing the Flint water crisis and Scio Township dioxane plume for starters.

Though not afflicted with an aging, urban water pipe system or a toxic manufacturing plant, Freedom Township—like most rural areas in Washtenaw County—experiences development pressures from a growing economy and urban sprawl. It's up to local government to stand in the gap and not only preserve rural character, but protect the local water supply from pollution caused by stormwater runoff and promote clean, healthy inland lakes on which the local economy depends.

With projections estimating that 40% of Freedom Township's remaining open space will be developed over the next 20 years, smart growth that protects natural areas is key, said Olsson. That means taking a hard look at the township's current Master Plan and Zoning Ordinance, which currently show little designated natural areas. Also, development patterns thus far have been low density—meaning less people consume more land.

But it's the preemptive tagging of natural, open space and the proactive clustering of development where infrastructure already exists that will minimize impact on the water cycle, Olsson said. Earlier this year, Olsson helped the township create a green infrastructure map identifying key open spaces, natural areas and waterways with the goal of helping shape land use policy.

That can be hard to do when many rural boards and planning commissions are dominated by conservative farmers who view environmental advocates as a threat, said Michigan Lake and Stream Association Executive Director Scott Brown.

“To them, individual property rights are the last bastion of personal rights,” Brown said.

What’s at stake is, well, just about everything, as Flint residents can attest. Polluted water supply and other effects of stormwater runoff affect everyone: citizens, businesses, industries, and agriculture.

Lyndon Township Planning Commissioner Sally Rutzky and Webster Township Planning Commissioner Erica Perry provided firsthand examples of local government scrambling to educate itself about the importance of identifying and protecting natural areas before it was too late.

“[McCoig materials] wanted to blast a hole in the middle of the hub and all of a sudden we realized what was going on,” Rutzky said of the company’s request to create a gravel mine on Stofer Hill—the highest point of Pinckney and Waterloo recreation areas.

Perry spoke of an unprepared board and planning commission when Webster Township’s population doubled between 1990 and 2000. The governing bodies were mainly comprised of old farming families who tried to provide good stewardship of land but didn’t yet understand the value of protecting natural areas.

“If it wasn’t farmable, then it was wasteland,” Perry said.

The township had a near miss in 2003 when a developer sought to create a large-scale mobile home park on a 320-acre farm in the core of the township’s southern agricultural district. The developer was defeated on a technicality, Perry said, and officials woke up to the need for a proactive Master Plan to control growth.

The township bought into the concept of preserving land with conservation easements (also known as Purchase of Development Rights) and “the land north of North Territorial Road was no longer viewed as worthless but as high priority,” Perry said.

Former Legacy Land Conservancy Director Barry Lonik spoke of the three Washtenaw County townships—Webster, Scio and Ann Arbor--that have successfully passed, and renewed, millages to conserve and preserve natural areas. Lonik encourages more municipalities to consider land conservation options, pointing out the fact that build-out ends up costing substantially more by way of emergency services, schooling and roads than the cost of buying development rights so the land is never developed.

In the end, Olsson condensed the point of the forum into one sentence: “All the water we have on the earth right now is all the water we will ever have.”

Municipalities interested in learning more about planning techniques that protect water and land can email Huron River Watershed Council at kolsson@hrwc.org.

