

MINUTES

Eau Claire County

• Committee on Parks & Forest •

Monday, September 09, 2024, at 4:00 p.m.

Agricultural and Resource Center

227 1st Street West., Altoona – Room 103 and 104

Members Present: Joe Knight, Tami Schraufnagel, Cory Sisk, Michele Skinner, Christy Tomczak

Others Present: Josh Pedersen – Director, Jody Gindt – Assistant Director, Kimberly Watnemoe – Office Coordinator (Committee Clerk), Todd Johnson – Park Manager, Erika Gullerud – Finance Analyst, Mark Bull – Sheriff's Department Kyle Johnson – DNR County Forest Liaison, Jacob Tumm – EC County Forester, Kathryn Schauf – County Administrator (Virtual), Elliot (Virtual)- WQOW, Johnathan Wallug – Citizen, Mitch Ball – Citizen, Dale Rabuck – Citizen, Dan Pearson – Citizen, Jason Johnson – Citizen, Jay Johnson – Citizen, Brian Goss – Citizen, Dylan Goss – Citizen, Jeff Goss – Citizen, Bob Evenson – Citizen, Dan Kruse - Citizen

Call to Order Committee on Parks & Forest and confirmation of meeting notice

Chairman Knight called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m and confirmed public posting of the meeting.

Review of August 12, 2024, Committee Meeting Minutes

Supervisor Schraufnagel motions to approve the minutes from August 12, 2024, All in favor.

Public Comment

Dylan Goss submitted an email comment which was read aloud by Committee Clerk Watnemoe.

Dale Rabuck shared a comment that he camps in the forest often and would like to continue to do so.

Jay Johnson shared that he felt blindsided by the decision as he and his family have been going out to enjoy the forest for the last 35 years. He did not feel they should be punished as they always pay their fees and do not litter. He rarely sees other campers out there during hunting season and did not see how increasing the fee would help the problems faced to the county. If the price is increased to \$12 per day this will price his group out of camping in the County Forest.

Jeff Goss from Augusta shared that his family has been camping and hunting the county forest for the last 30 years and rarely see anyone else out in the forest. They take care of the land picking up litter and making sure they leave the land as clean if not cleaner than when they found it. He felt this was a knee jerk reaction to an issue with summer campers. He felt these individuals should be fined and delt with and not punish the hunters who utilize the forests in the right way.

Brian Goss from Eau Claire shared that hunters during hunting season act as a neighborhood watch for the Game Wardens, Parks Department, and Sheriff's department. By taking away the permits he felt we were driving them out. He expressed concerns about the \$12 nightly fee and stated he would not be bow hunting if this was increased this much.

John Wallug shared that he is a disabled hunter that hunts with the Goss family, if he can't go with them, he feels he is being discriminated against. He also shared that they always leave the forest in the same or better shape of when they found it.

Dan Kruse shared that if there are issues with policing the area, the hunters always work with law enforcement and report issues they see. It limits the help they can provide if camping is not allowed until October 15th.

Deputy Bull provided background comments on the issues currently facing the County Forest. He shared that we are not looking at taking away the hunting. We're only trying to combat the issues at hand. This year the homeless living in the County Forest really took off. They are buying cheap, old, run-down campers and setting up shop in the County Forest. Bull, Johnson, and Gindt have been issuing tickets. The main issues are burning trash and or treated wood, piling up trash, illegal activity, and not following the dispersed camping rules. With hunting season approaching and bear baiting currently going on, Bull shared safety concerns especially as we get to gun season. He expressed that the Sherriif's department and the Parks Department is not looking to hose anyone over i.e. stop anyone from utilizing the forest during

the hunting season. He stated they never intended to hurt the people who were using the land correctly. However, he expressed that the problem is only going to get worse if we can't deal with it.

End of public comment period.

County Forest Camping Policy

Director Pedersen started this discussion by providing background on why we started charging a camping fee to begin with. The fee system began in 2014/2015 and was made to be \$10 as it would allow the department to have active locations on where people are camping for safety reasons. When the fee was introduced, this is when the department also started allowing dispersed camping during the summer months. Over the last two years, but mainly these last 4-6 months, the department has had repeated issues with individuals. These issues include individuals not vacating/no permits, exposed needles, child service issues, domestic violence issues, individuals camping that have active warrants, and lots of trash clean up. They have also seen issues with EMS not being able to respond to calls. A lot of these campers as Bull shared are run down campers that people will leave in the forest. This falls on the department to have towed and pay for which runs the department roughly \$2,000-\$3,000 per unit removed. For a program that does not make much money this cost is a lot for the department.

Pedersen shared that staff hours are also a concern. The hours stack up for staff as repeat visits to a site are typically needed. On average it could take 3-5 trips before our staff, or the sheriff's department connects with the individuals. Also, vacating for one night is a huge issue for the department. Currently, the rule states that individuals can camp for 14 nights and then they must vacate for 24 hours before they can return, which is very hard for the department to enforce making it easy for individuals to live out there. Pedersen expressed that the department and the committee understand it is not the sportsmen or sportswomen that we are having issues with and appreciate them utilizing the land as it's intended. However, these challenges the department are facing are very difficult. Pedersen also expressed that we are not the only county facing this issue, Marathon County is also dealing with similar issues. Pedersen then read through all six of the proposed dispersed camping policy changes included in the agenda packet. Park Manager Johnson added to the proposed list that all sites must be registered before someone takes occupancy. Deputy Bull added that he would like to look at adding a couple county ordinances, one for camping in a non-designated area and the second would be for people who continue to not purchase permits.

Supervisor Sisk motions to return to the old policy allowing dispersed camping only from Sept 1st – June 1st. Motion fails 4 to 1.

Supervisor Schraufnagel motions to adopt the proposed camping policy changes. Motions fails 4 to 1.

Supervisor Sisk motions to lift the ban on dispersed camping today (September 9th) and open the forest back up for hunting season, while the staff/committee continue to discuss policy options at further meetings. All in favor.

More discussion on this topic will occur at the next meeting on October 14th.

Access For Town of Seymour Rescue Equipment to Access Lake Altoona

Supervisor Skinner wanted to speak about this topic as it is extremely difficult for boats and safety equipment to access Lake Altoona on the north side. Johnson stated they are working on a boat landing at Harstad Park which would allow access to the Eau Claire River, allowing easier access down there. The Parks Department would be happy to recommend locations and work alongside emergency management and or the highway department as needed to get these projects off the ground.

Host WCFA Summer Tour 2026/2027 -

Pedersen stated that Rebekah, the executive director of WCFA has reached out a few times about having Eau Claire County host the summer tour. It's been roughly 23 years since Eau Claire County has hosted. Assistant Director Gindt shared they are a lot of cost to the department and a lot of staff time. Pedersen shared we can do it, but we don't have

to. These summer tours are three days in length, usually a Wednesday – Friday with presentations, tours, a social outing etc.

Supervisor Knight motions to approve hosting on one of the two years. All in favor.

Director's Report

Pedersen shared that camping season is winding down, with Johnson sharing this was the busiest year on record. Coon Fork 40 was recently hosted at Coon Fork and went well. The Expo center hosted the Wisconsin interscholastic cycling race that was very popular and also went well. Tower Ridge was able to last minute host the Husky Invite for cross country. This was a very busy event. The department would be open to hosting again but will need to think about parking considerations in the future as this was a problem. Jody, Jake, Josh, and Todd are hosting some stops for Leadership days this week showing a few timber sales, new additions to Coon Fork, as well as a presentation to the Leadership group.

Fall Forestry Tour

Friday, October 4th at Noon committee members will gather at the Ag Center in Altoona for a fall tour. Parks and Forest advisory committee members will be invited as well.

Future Parks & Forest Committee Meetings and Items for Discussion

Next Parks & Forest committee meeting date is set for October 14, at 4:00 p.m.

Committee on Parks & Forest Adjournment

The Committee on Parks & Forest adjourned at 5:44pm.

Respectfully Submitted by,



Kimberly Watnemoe
Committee Clerk
Office Coordinator