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# The Times-Gazette

timesgazette.com

Volume 13, Number 238

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 3, 2009

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# State denies request to build boat docks at Rocky Fork

■ \$18.2 million project would have resulted in the development of 58 homes with price ranges from \$400,000 to \$750,000

By JEFF GILLILAND  
The Times-Gazette

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources has denied a request to allow developers of the Rocky Fork Golf and Lake Resorts to build boat docks on Rocky Fork Lake.

The request was made by the Highland County Board of Commissioners after a similar request from the commissioners was denied by the ODNR in July.

A group of three private developers have already started the initial phases of an \$18.2 million project that would result in the development of 58 homes with price ranges from \$400,000 to \$750,000. The plan was for the homeowners to have access to both the golf course and lake.

Originally, the plan asked for 60 boat docks on Rocky Fork Lake. In the second request, just 20 boat docks were asked for.

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# Rocky Fork: ODNR denies request again

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The developers said they had 11 people committed to purchase lots for buildings, subject to approval of the boat docks.

Highland County Economic Development Director Dan Cowdrey said that since the developers planned to build the docks, maintain them, pay the state's annual dock fees and collect the fees, the project would have generated approximately \$8,000 per year for ODNR.

Commissioner Gary Heaton said that after the original request was denied, ODNR told them to, "give us a reason to change the policy we have in effect."

Heaton said that with Highland County having the second-highest unemployment rate in the state, and because development at the golf course would have brought in both development and lasting jobs, the commissioners hoped ODNR would change its mind.

"The thing they discount is that just about every other state official we approached outside of ODNR thought this was a great idea," Heaton said. "We thought this was an excellent opportunity for them to be able tell other people, 'hey, this is what we were able to do in Highland County.'"

"Evidently, (ODNR) didn't see it the same way."

According to the four-year plan, in 2010 alone, the golf course would provide 12 full-time jobs and seven part-time jobs. It also said it would generate \$120,000 in local real estate taxes, \$4,200 in local taxes from golf course rounds, \$3,300 from golf course income tax and \$25,500 in income tax from home building.

The plan also said each new home would employ six to nine workers, and that a total of \$3.5 million in goods would have been purchased locally next year

alone. The plan also estimated that more than \$80,000 local dollars would be generated through restaurant business, fuel sales, and water, telephone, Internet and cable fees.

The developers could not be reached Friday, but Heaton said they told the commissioners that their lender said that if they couldn't proceed with their high-end development plan, their funding would be eliminated.

"Taking your position in mind after re-evaluating the request, I again reached the similar conclusion that Dan West, our chief of the Division of Parks and Recreation, stated in his letter of July 14, 2009," Anthony J. Celebrezze III, ODNR deputy director, wrote in a letter the commissioners received Sept. 28. "The ODNR cannot allow such a development to occur on state park land and waters. We would not be in line with our mission that requires the ODNR to ensure a balance between wise use and protection of our natural resources."

The ODNR listed the following factors as reasons why the request was denied:

- "Encroachment around the lake onto state land has been a major issue for a number of years. This includes surrounding landowners manipulating state land for their benefit and the building of permanent structures upon state land without proper authorization."

- "Our policy of no additional coastline development includes not installing more cluster docks. This has resulted in a waiting list for existing docks. Allowing this marina to move forward would be unfair to those people and could open the state up to a legal challenge."

- "The proposed area for the marina is shallow and will eventually require dredging to keep

the water navigable. We cannot be assured of our future funding stream, but we can be assured of the future need to dredge..."

- "(The) development is on a bluff. This would require significant modification of the parkland hillside to allow access to water. This access would naturally follow an existing ravine which would have to be paved to avoid washout."

- "The park has more than enough existing dock space at the nearby marina to accommodate (your) needs. We are willing to work to isolate an area to concentrate the boats for this development."

In an Oct. 1 response to the ODNR, the commissioners wrote: "... We are, of course, very disappointed the request was denied. Highland County has the second highest unemployment rate in the state and it seems to us we are sent conflicting signals from our state government. One hand tells us to be proactive in development of jobs for our unemployed. The other hand erects obstacles to reach our goal. The situation is becoming increasingly more difficult to explain to our residents."

"The question asked frequently by people familiar with how Rocky Fork came to be, (is) what is ODNR's responsibility when you create a lake for economic development and recreation? Do unelected administrators have the responsibility to change the intent of a project? Does ODNR have the legislative approval to force their views on what is best for a community project when those who decide do not live or work in a community when the views of ODNR have a direct effect on the survival of the local economy?"

"... We will inform the developers of the decision and hope to still work out a solution for the best use of the property."