

Game Commission grilled

Local officials seek respect for no-net loss of property resolution

BY KARA O'NEIL
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The question on the minds of local officials and members of the Venango County Planning Commission during their meeting earlier this week with representatives of the state Game Commission was how much land is enough?

Among two questions submitted to the Game Commission before the meeting was one regarding what interest the agency has in the Polk State Center campus.

David Gustafson, deputy executive director of the Game Commission, said the agency has an interest in about 140 acres of woods and fields on the east side of the campus that

borders state game lands.

"We are only interested in lands that fit in with the state game lands," he said, and that the Game Commission has no interest in the buildings at Polk Center or other lands adjoining the center other than that 140 acres.

The other question — Does the Game Commission intend to respect

the no-net loss of property resolution passed by the Venango County commissioners? — took up the rest of Tuesday's meeting.

Gustafson said the Game Commission is a state entity that is not bound to respect the ordinances of local governments.

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The agency is aware of the commissioners' no-net loss resolution and can "respect it to a degree," but not when it conflicts with the Game Commission's mission of conservation or when the agency wants to acquire more land that "meets our needs," Gustafson said.

The Game Commission's obligation, he explained, is to manage resources in the state, and it is empowered to acquire lands for purposes of conservation and for public access to land for hunting and fishing.

"There seems to be a narrative going around that the Game Commission is on a land grab. That is not true," Gustafson said, noting the agency was purchasing more land 50 years ago than it is today.

When he cited that "Venango County is less than 10% owned by state entities," Venango County Commissioners Chairman Sam Breene replied, "It should be less than that."

Gustafson said the Game Commission's mission is more than lands for hunting and fishing, and that it also is about conservation.

"Then there is no end to it," Breene replied in reference to the agency's acquisition of land.

Breene said although he uses and appreciates the state game lands, Venango County has enough state game lands and that the county is in need of development.

When Breene asked Gustafson to respect the no-net loss resolution and communicate with local officials about the Game Commission's property acquisitions, Gustafson did not commit to respecting the resolution. However, he did say the Game Commission has "no problem having conversations with local governments."

Gustafson said development and conservation have been in conflict since the days of the nation's westward expansion and are likely to continue to be in conflict.

The Game Commission doesn't acquire all of the land offered to it, Gustafson explained, noting the land must fit the agency's needs.

He said the Game Commission is most interested in land that is contiguous to existing game lands, provides access to an inaccessible part of the game lands, has a critical or unique species on it or is in an area where there is a lack of public lands.

Gustafson noted although the Game Commission is not permitted by law to sell land, sometimes the agency exchanges land. He cited a recent exchange in Dubois where the Game Commission gave up land it owned along a highway that didn't serve its purposes, but was prime for development, in exchange for land on a mountainside.

"There has to be a balance," Venango County Commissioner Ken Bryan said. "For timber, oil and natural gas extraction, property has to be available to do that in an ethical way."

"We want that balance and we are right where we want to be in Venango County. So we ask you to respect that and keep us in the conversation. People feel you are taking opportunities for people to make a living."

Planning Commission member Keith Klingler said, "When you talk about conservation, you talk like the government is the only one who can conserve land. Private landowners do a great job of conservation every day."

"More than 10% of land in Venango County is in public ownership. That feels like enough. Local elected officials are making a decision; we don't want to become Elk or Forest counties that are 50 or 60% government-owned."

"You mentioned Polk. How about finding 100 acres to put back in the private sector?"

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