

Stronach Township, county at odds

Posted by Justine McGuire on March 26th, 2015

County planning disagrees with township ordinance changes

MANISTEE — Stronach Township zoning ordinance changes that affect the environment and private property around the Little Manistee River were shot down by the Manistee County Planning Commission at its Thursday meeting.

The main issue that the commission had with the changes was the elimination of the requirement for a vegetation buffer around the river, and the removal of restrictions on building in the 100-year floodplain.

A buffer includes canopy trees and understory vegetation. The 100-year floodplain is an area that floods during a 100-year rain event, which has a 1 percent likelihood of occurring in any year.

ROB CARSON
Manistee County planner

“The Manistee County Planning Department does not support the removal of the environmental protection standards in place along the Little Manistee River or any water body and wetland of the state within Stronach Township or elsewhere in Manistee County,” said Rob Carson, Manistee County planner, during the meeting.

Carson’s recommendation to the county commission was split; he supported some changes that clarified the zoning ordinance, and disagreed with others that lessened local environmental protections.

The planning commissioners’ vote was 4-2 to support Carson’s recommendation.

However, the commission’s disagreement with the Stronach Township Zoning Commission’s changes are merely suggestions. The next step is for the Stronach Township Board of Trustees to take up the issue.

“The changes that Stronach is proposing to their environmental regulatory measures for streams, wetlands and the 100-year floodplain are not in line with practices in land use for sound water quality standards,” Carson said in an email to the *News Advocate*.

Much of the debate during the meeting took place over the allowance to build in the 100-year floodplain — the floodplain is mapped out by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA allows structures to be built on the floodplain, but requires the

landowner to carry flood insurance, and requires the local township, village or city to administer the National Flood Insurance Rate Map Program.

Carson argued that habitable structures should not be allowed in the floodplain because taxpayers pay for the flood insurance payouts, and are paying for large grants to purchase and remove structures from floodplains in other parts of the state through FEMA.

Bob Rishel, who is on the township zoning commission and the county planning commission, argued that the township is simply trying to give property owners rights to build on their land along the river. There are about six undeveloped, privately-owned parcels on the river in the township, he said.

“What person in their right mind who owns property on that river would deliberately do anything to destroy it – you’d have to be out of your mind,” he said.

Damage to, or removal of, the buffer zone on the edge of the river could cause soil erosion on the banks, which would damage the breeding grounds for steelhead and Chinook salmon, Carson said.

The Little Manistee River provides those fish to the entire Great Lakes region through work at the Little Manistee River Weir, located in Stronach Township.

Carson pointed out what he called the township leaders’ hypocrisy on wanting to eliminate protections to the river, after recently fighting with him against the Kettle Hole Drain in Stronach Township for environmental reasons to protect Claybank Creek, which flows into the Big Manistee River.

Rishel said that it’s not hypocrisy because the private landowners are different from the Manistee County Drain Office, which had oversight on the drain.

Many people stood up for public comment, most of whom were part of the Little Manistee Watershed Conservation Council.

Jim Squier, council vice president and administrator, said anything that’s detrimental to the river should be stopped.

“They’re making promises to protect the Claybank Creek, and then going to trash the Little Manistee River,” he told the News Advocate prior to the meeting. “You can’t have it both ways.”

The section of the river in the township is a pristine fish factory that shouldn’t be disturbed, said Squier, of Elk Township in Lake County.

“If that becomes trashed, it’s going to impact the entire watershed,” he said.

The watershed consists of Lake, Manistee and Mason counties. The council includes 400-500 members.

The changes could also affect the entire Great Lakes region if there was damage to fish breeding waters, he said. Tourism and the economy would take a hit if fish weren't supplied from the river.

"The bottom line is, this is bigger than Stronach Township; it's bigger than just the people who live on the river," he said. "This affects the entire watershed, the entire state, the entire Great Lakes region."

Posted by Justine McGuire

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