

Concerned residents discuss old growth forest at Crown Hill

Leaders stress the importance of contacting legislators to halt project

By Amber Stearns [@AmberLStearns](#)



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Clark Kahlo with the Alliance of Crown Hill Neighbors addresses the crowd at the Martin Luther King Community Center.

Amber Stearns

It was standing room only at the Martin Luther King Community Center on 40th Street in Indianapolis Wednesday evening. Well over 100 people gathered to learn more about the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) plan to cut down most of the old growth forest on the grounds of Crown Hill Cemetery and how to stop the project.

The Indianapolis cemetery sold 14.75 acres of land to the VA at a price of \$810,000 for the purpose of creating a national cemetery for veterans. Columbaria would be erected to house the cremated remains of up to 28,100 veterans. The display would also include a plaza for the American flag and the flags of the various branches of the armed services, an information center for families and friends to look up the location of their deceased loved ones, bathrooms and a lot more.

However the acreage in question is an old growth forest housing trees that are estimated to be between 300 and 500 years old. But the grove is more than just a bunch of old trees. According to biologists and environmental specialists the grove is a complete sustaining ecosystem. The grove is home to a wide variety of wildlife, including two species of bats native to Indiana — one of which is on the endangered species list and the other on the threatened species list.

It's not as though the project was a complete secret. Several media outlets reported on the sale when the VA announced it in September 2015. The information disclosed indicated the Crown Hill land on the north end of the cemetery would become a national cemetery as a part of the VA's "Urban Initiative" to make veterans burials in national cemeteries more accessible to families. However, the exact location was not revealed in the released information. Crown Hill tried to sell corner of the cemetery land to condo developers 10 years ago. The same groups that gathered Wednesday were successful in preventing any sale and development of the property back then. Unfortunately the sale to the VA snuck by them like a thief in the night.

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Indiana Forest Alliance Jeff Stant explained to the group that thievery is exactly what happened in the sale, because the VA did not follow the law.

"The actual regulations under the National Environmental Policy Act that apply specifically to the Veterans Administration emphasize that they are not to acquire property in a project before they have completed the environmental documentation," says Stant. "The comment period on the environmental assessment ran out on October 13, 2015. They didn't tell anybody about it so they didn't get any comments. But they had already acquired the property in September."

Indianapolis media reported on the sale of the Crown Hill land September 24, nearly 20 days prior to the documented deadline for comments. Stant also noted that in the final assessment, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management told the VA that the specific parcel of land in question would be highly controversial based on the opposition to development in 2007. In other words, the VA shouldn't be surprised by the public reaction that is occurring now.

So if the actual sale is now nearly a year old, how can citizens stop the project and save the trees?

"This is a political struggle," says Stant. "The only time I have seen something like this that's gotten this close to being lost and been reversed, it's taken an absolute outpouring from the effected community."

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And that means contacting legislators repeatedly to voice concern and opposition. Stant said if senators and congressional representatives get involved and push the issue, the VA can go back and “re-do” what was missed before – a public hearing and an assessment of alternatives. He urged attendees to make that contact and stress the desire for a public hearing and a new public comment period.

A representative from Senator Joe Donnelly’s office was present for the meeting and said the senator is listening to constituents and learning about the situation. A representative from Congressman André Carson’s office told NUVO that he is reviewing the procedure of the sale and is checking to see if everything was done properly or if corners were cut as the Indiana Forest Alliance alleges. Both offices confirm they have received hundreds of calls from people unhappy with the current plan.

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The VA had been scheduled to accept bids for the construction project this month but has postponed that until November due to the current controversy. Stant says that isn’t a lot of time to reverse the course, but it can be done if people continue to raise awareness and express their outrage to officials.

“You’ve got to stun the people who are the decision-makers here,” said Stant. “And they need to be stunned.”

In 2014, one year before the sale of the woods to the VA, Crown Hill Cemetery published a coffee table book about the history of the cemetery along with notable facts and tales. In the book, Crown Hill officials called the old growth forest a part of the legacy they have protected for the community.

One can’t help but sing the words of “big Yellow Taxi” by Joni Mitchell right now.

*“They took all the trees and put them in a tree museum,
And then they charged the people a dollar and a half just to
see ‘em.
Don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve
got ‘til its gone,
They paved paradise and they put up a parking lot.”*

A public walk through the forest is scheduled for Sunday, Sept. 25 at 3 p.m. Veterans and school children are tentatively scheduled to lead the walk to let people experience the woods and know first hand what is at stake.

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