

Sierra Club Hoosier Chapter Opposes development in Crown Hill Woods

Ten years ago the citizens of greater Indianapolis made it clear that they did not want developers to destroy a forest remnant in Crown Hill Cemetery containing large trees, some of which pre-date settlement. The rezoning of this forest, wetland and surrounding 45 acres was denied, and the land was to be designated as a nature preserve, to be purchased by a non-profit land trust. Sadly the stock market plummeted and the donors for the land trust backed away. Almost a decade passed, so we assumed the Crown Hill Cemetery leaders were going to leave this forest remnant alone.

Urban green-space is priceless, which makes Crown Hill a gem in our city. There is actually a chapter about this woods in Crown Hill's beautiful coffee table book published in 2013. The canopy of trees helps filter the air in a polluted city where childhood asthma is rampant from urban pollution. It is also a place where citizens can experience the magic of majestic old trees right in the middle of the city.

One year ago the National Cemetery Association of the VA purchased the most densely wooded area in Crown Hill, the very area that was in dispute ten years ago. The VA bought the property before environmental documents were complete, violating not only the overall Whitehouse Council on Environmental Quality NEPA regulations but the VA's own NEPA regulations. There was no public hearing done before the purchase, and the VA should have explored alternative placement of the cemetery to reduce environmental impact. There was no attempt to reach out to affected parties, including Veterans themselves, who are none too pleased to learn that their cremains may end up replacing a priceless woodland. None of those who spoke out ten years ago knew the transaction took place, nor were they notified.

The National Cemetery Association has responded thus far by implying that they will continue as planned but will work to leave "some of the trees." This is unsatisfactory, as this segment of forest is an ecosystem. Setting buildings and pavilion memorials into the ground and paving for roads and sidewalks will destroy the roots of any remaining trees that are nearby. The only way we can save this is to keep it intact, with the old trees stately and proud, the fallen branches making homes for forest animals, the puddles for salamanders, the vines, the understory, the mosses and fungi, the deer, bats and birds. The Sierra Club, the oldest environmental advocacy group in America, has always had the mission to explore, enjoy and protect our natural places. This woods is a prime example of what we stand to protect and we stand with all those who oppose its use for anything other than existing as is for future generations to explore, enjoy and learn. We hope the VA will sell it to a land trust for preservation and move their memorial elsewhere.

Respectfully.

The Hoosier Chapter of the Sierra Club