



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Citizens File Legal Action To Preserve Crown Hill North Woods

(INDIANAPOLIS, IN) – Today, a request for a preliminary injunction and other relief was filed in U.S. District Court to stay the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs from advancing its columbaria project at Crown Hill Cemetery's North Woods. The project would strip 14.75 acres of forest with old-growth trees that pre-date European settlement of Indiana.

“The plaintiffs seeking this injunction are neighbors, veterans, scientists and others who see the irreplaceable ecological value of this forest to the city, the surrounding neighborhood and to Indiana’s heritage,” said Jeff Stant, executive director of the Indiana Forest Alliance. “There is no question that alternative sites exist for this worthy project to honor veterans.”

The complaint states that the Veterans Administration violated four fundamental parts of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA):

1. issuing a “Finding of No Significant Impact” for a project that will indeed have a significant environmental impact;
2. failing to look at alternatives for the project as required by NEPA;
3. not meeting mandatory requirements to inform the public including holding a public hearing on their environmental documents; and
4. prejudicing the decision to build at the site prior to the completion of the required environmental reviews that were supposed to be used to inform the decision.

Despite vocal community opposition, the VA moved forward to solicit bids on November 9 to hire companies to remove the trees. Those bids are due back to the VA by December 9; clearing could begin before the end of December.

There is currently an offer on the table to buy the land back from the VA. November 22, the Laura Hare Charitable Trust extended an offer to purchase the land from the VA for a negotiable amount. If accepted, the land would be permanently preserved and opened up to the community for passive recreation. “The Hare Trust works to preserve natural areas, and the Crown Hill North Woods are one of the most ecologically significant sites we have tried to protect,” said Dr. Lenore Tedesco, spokesperson for the Trust. “The destruction of these woods would represent a permanent and significant loss. We believe there are more suitable locations for the columbaria. We are hopeful that our offer to purchase the parcel from the VA will enable them to find a more suitable site for the development that can be celebrated by all.”

The North Woods at Crown Hill is “a relict natural area, not a planting or ‘restoration’, but a true remnant of the once-vast hardwood forests of Indiana. ... This site carries inordinate biological and cultural value,” according to a 2006 Assessment by an ecologist with the Indiana Division of Nature Preserves.

Since the VA did not conduct a tree survey of the site, a team of five certified arborists and 20 volunteers conducted a survey of 738 trees in Crown Hill North Woods in late October. “The goal of the survey was

to assess the environmental services provided by these trees by documenting their size, number and diversity,” said Jerome Delbridge, International Society of Arboriculture (ISA)-certified arborist. “Intact forests provide a range of services, including saving energy, storing carbon to mitigate climate change, intercepting and storing storm water to lessen flooding, and filtering pollutants from air. They also increase property values in nearby communities.”

The survey identified 550 healthy trees and included 36 different tree species. The largest tree noted was a Northern Red Oak more than five feet across (63 inches) and more than 16 feet around (16.6’ circumference). Numerous trees were found to be more than four feet across.

“There are very few woods of this quality remaining in Marion County,” said Rebecca Dolan, Ph.D., a botanist and plaintiff in the case. “The vegetation ranks comparably to that of the highest quality nature preserves in Central Indiana.” The lack of invasive plants in the forest interior and the 125 species of plants (90% of them native) make this forest a rarity, and a treasure.

“The loss of this forest dishonors us all,” said Vietnam War-era veteran Paul Richard, also a plaintiff. “The VA should select a more sustainable alternative.”

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INTERVIEW SOURCES

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HIGH-RES PHOTOS AVAILABLE FOR DOWNLOAD

October 30 Tree Inventory:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/139729494@N08/albums/72157674476849902>

(contact Anne Laker for photo IDs)

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ABOUT THE INDIANA FOREST ALLIANCE

IFA is a non-profit, statewide organization founded in 1996 and dedicated to preserving and restoring Indiana’s native hardwood forest ecosystem for the enjoyment of all. Through expert research, influential advocacy, effective organizing, powerful storytelling, and when necessary, litigation, IFA ensures that the integrity of Indiana’s forest ecosystem thrives as a natural resource to benefit native wildlife, soil, air and water quality; and as the emblem of our natural heritage. By leading a coalition of citizens, organizations and decision makers, IFA establishes, protects, and restores forests for future generations.