



MARCUS: Our forests, our future

Morton J. Marcus Eye on the Pie

January 16, 2018

A friend is trying to examine the big issues facing our nation and the solutions available to us. I suggested that study include land use which reflects and often causes many of the dilemmas Americans have failed to resolve.

We complain about congestion in our urban areas while bemoaning the decline of rural areas. This is a land use issue.

The high costs of health care are a persistent concern. Our sedentary life style contributes to our need for health care, but we have organized our activities and our infrastructure to avoid exercise that involves exertion. This too is a land use issue.

The wild fires, mudslides and floods of California are largely problems stemming from land use decisions made in the public and private sectors.

Americans delight in the variety and stimulation of the built world. Yet, simultaneously, we seek to escape the pressures, noise and excesses of what we call civilization. We want access to places offering us solitude and the refreshment of nature. This desire can be satisfied by altering our land use patterns.

For this reason Hoosiers should applaud the efforts of three state Senators who authored Senate Bill 275, a bill to require the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to set aside 30 percent of each state forest as an Old Forest Area.

Senators Eric Bassler, R-Washington, Sen. Jon Ford, R-Terre Haute and Eric Koch, R-Bedford, understand our state forests are part of our heritage and our future.

As is well known, Indiana was a land of forests and wetlands when it became a state. Over decades forests were cut down and wetlands drained for farming. The state seal depicts a pioneer chopping down a tree while the ambiguous sun either rises or sets.

Given the 19th century mindset and a belief in inexhaustible national resources, the Indiana legislature did not begin a state forest program at the start of the 20th century. By the Great Depression many farmers had so denuded their land that the dangers of flooding were magnified while the nutrients of the soil drained from barren fields. The state then stepped in and expanded the state forest program,

providing immediate economic relief to land owners with diminished assets. It opened an opportunity for future generations to restore and protect forested land.

Eighty years ago, many Hoosiers thought of forests only as suppliers of wood and food products. Today, we recognize manufacturing wood products is a diminished industry and few families depend on the forests for food.

Therefore, it is time to rethink our state forests. Setting aside 30 percent as Old Forest Areas provides recreational and scientific benefits. At the same time, other forested areas can be logged appropriately to support local wood using industries while allowing a diverse set of recreational uses.

Senate Bill 275 deserves passage to open a new era in land use for Indiana and to meet our obligations to future generations.

Morton Marcus is an economist, writer and speaker. He may be reached at mortonjmarcus@yahoo.com.