

Sheboyganites voice environmental concerns at trial on Kohler golf course

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SHEBOYGAN - Residents voiced fears Friday at a public trial that a proposed Kohler golf course will damage the environment, and blasted the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' process for approving it.

Environmental group Friends of the Black River Forest challenged the DNR's decision in April to issue Kohler Co. a wetlands permit for a proposed golf course and were granted a contest case hearing — a kind of administrative trial overseen by the state Department of Administration's Division of Hearing and Appeals.

The Friends allege that the DNR was not thorough enough in its analysis of the proposed golf course before issuing the permit and was not transparent with the public regarding the possible effects of the project on the environment.

The five-day trial hearing was held at the Mead Public Library in Sheboygan and saw experts called as witnesses by the Friends group, the DNR and by Kohler. Friday was the last day of the trial, which concluded with a day dedicated to hearing public comments. Administrative Law Judge Mark Kaiser presided over the trial.

More than 20 people weighed in on the DNR's decision. Most of the speakers were against the course being built and argued that it would destroy too much of the natural habitat and wetlands of the area. A smaller group of speakers in favor of the course consisted mainly of members of the business community, who spoke about the economic advantages of the course being built.

Mary Faydash, co-founder of the Friends group, noted that DNR scientists found substantial negative effects on the environment and still issued the permit. And she said claims made by those seeking to develop the land should be called into question.

"It (the wetlands permit) asks us to take the word of a developer," she said.

Faydash and other speakers also expressed concerns about pesticide use and alleged that pesticides from the course could contaminate Lake Michigan. Faydash also worried about increased traffic generated by the proposed "championship" golf course.

Another speaker, an Illinois resident named Jane Ungari, spoke of her family's connection to the Black River Forest area. Her mother owns a piece of property on the north side of the park.

"I have been coming up here for 71 years. I love Sheboygan. I love Terry Andrae State Park," Ungari said. She said she hopes the golf course is not built so the land is preserved and future generations of her family are also able to enjoy the land.

Multiple other witnesses, including Mandy Tan who lives on the edge of the proposed course, detailed their personal experiences hiking the trails and using the park.

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Sheboygan resident Jim Buchholz, a former superintendent of the Kohler-Andrea State Park and a DNR employee for 36 years, said the DNR's approval process in this case was sloppy.

"I feel the DNR's preliminary wetland approval for allowing the destruction of rare globally significant wetland area does not follow the agency's own wetland preservation standards," he said. "I also feel the public has not been given adequate information of the significance or scope of wetlands that will be altered or filled by the Kohler development."

Another Sheboygan resident, Mike Kleist, said that although he really enjoys the recreational aspect of the park, he is in support of the golf course and believes the DNR was thorough and transparent enough to grant Kohler the permit.

"I value our state's natural resources, including all the state parklands, the forest lands, streams and wetland areas," he said. "That being said, I am in strong support of the proposed golf course project."

He cited the economic advantage of adding 220-plus jobs, tens of millions in tax revenue and the benefits the course would have for Sheboygan's reputation.

"It enhances our growing reputation as a tourist destination that Sheboygan County has become in the last few years," he said.

Rob Jansen, executive director of the Wisconsin State Golf Association said the organization supports Kohler's proposed course. He said Kohler is out of the running for many major tournaments due to a shift in tournament schedules, which will mean less chance the course would regularly host large crowds with lots of traffic.

"The PGA Championship, which Kohler has hosted on multiple occasions, is moving its dates from August to May starting in 2019, which essentially eliminates all Wisconsin courses from hosting that championship," he noted.

The hearing portion of the administrative trial is now done. The parties will have the opportunity to submit written briefs through September, meaning the judge will not issue a decision until early fall.

Other lawsuits regarding the proposed course are still within the circuit courts, including the Town of Wilson vs. City of Sheboygan annexation case and another lawsuit between the DNR and the Friends.