

THE CULTURAL DYNAMIC IN OPEN LAND PRESERVATION: THE CASE OF WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE

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ABSTRACT

Whether one discusses the preservation of the Alaskan wilderness or the preservation of an Illinois prairie, conflicting values impact on land use. Increased economic development leads to a decrease in land valued for preservation. A trade-off occurs. In the case of the Wolf Road Prairie, tension exists between ecologic and economic values. Ecologic values are those values which stress the role of the community in maintaining a healthy ecosystem and environmental quality. Open land preservation for agricultural, aesthetic, or recreational reasons becomes a common goal. Economic values stress the importance of continued economic growth for towns and cities. In an industrial society these values are deemed essential for economic survival. Although ecologic values and economic values may vastly differ, they converge on several fundamental relationships. These relationships pertain to deeper historical and religious values that a culture places on the land, the recognition of nonquantifiable aesthetic benefits of land preservation, the unseen role these benefits play in a community, and a definition of economic growth.

INTRODUCTION

Wolf Road Prairie, which is situated in Westchester, Illinois, approximately 24 miles from Chicago, is the focus of a local issue of land development versus prairie preservation. Westchester was incorporated in 1926. Prior to this, it was a farming community dating back to 1852.(1) As railway lines and roads were built, Westchester and neighboring suburbs became more closely linked to Chicago. To keep up with changing growth patterns in other suburbs, Westchester as a community has come to desire economic growth. As with the rest of the country, it wishes to make the transition from an industrial economy to an information and service economy.

The issue of prairie preservation in Westchester is set against this larger backdrop of Westchester's desire for growth. However, these seemingly conflicting desires are not entirely incompatible. Growth does not necessarily mean expansion. Growth signifies the development of a system of mature economic relationships preserving the original purpose of the suburbs--to provide open green land on which to live. Ecologic values emerge as central to community planning and can, and do, play a role in a town's economic transition. Sound land use planning, whereby land preservation remains a viable alternative, allows for future transitions. Both the prairie can be preserved and development can occur in Westchester, satisfying demands for open land and development.

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate values affecting this local issue, to explain key political factors which point to preservation, to explain basic economic factors, and then to derive recommendations.

HISTORY OF WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE

Wolf Road Prairie's history also provides clues to how the land was valued. Indians roamed the Illinois prairies and traded with the settlers who emerged from the forests and mountains of the East Coast into this vast sea of waving grasses. In pioneer diaries it has been written that a man on horseback could be completely hidden by these grasses. The early pioneers at first regarded the land as useless. They could not use wooden plows to cut the grassy roots to reach the rich, black, loamy soil. But with the invention of the steel moldboard plow, farmers could convert what was then discovered to be extremely valuable land into corn, wheat, and soybean fields.

Records in Westchester, Illinois state that a small German farm community called Fransozenbusch was founded in 1852 at the intersection of Wolf and Cermak Roads.(2) Steadily, prairie lands were either plowed for agriculture or developed for urbanization. In the 1920s, small parcels of land were divided up and sold by developer Samuel Insull in an area called "prairie" or in urban terms, "vacant lots."(3)

Village philosophy at this time emphasized expansion. However, the Depression halted housing construction on the land, creating a unique situation in the prairie's history. World War II diverted landowners' attention away from housing construction and toward the war effort as a few of these lots were used as "victory gardens." No water or sewage lines reached this land until 1985. Due to confusion over land titles of bankrupt Depression-era landowners, the prairie remained for some thirty more years an overgrown 80-acre vacant lot.

CASE HISTORY OF WOLF ROAD PRAIRIE

Floyd Swink, taxonomist at the Morton Arboretum, knew of the prairie in the 1940s.(4) Later, a high school biology teacher learned of the prairie from Alma Greene, also of the Arboretum. Several prairie professionals were aware of "prairie indicator" plants in the area, identifying it as true prairie. Furthermore, this unique ecosystem, which can grow only in particular soil and climate conditions, was pristine. It had not been plowed.

From 1974 to 1978, Jack Shouba and several others organized high school students and citizens in the Save the Prairie Society and local garden clubs to canvass communities for petition signatures and to raise money to buy lots. They organized to convince local government officials that, due to public interest, the prairie should be preserved. In the meantime, a complex ownership pattern was largely responsible for preventing development or rezoning of the land.

High school students, under the direction of Jack Shouba, grew plants to sell at plant sales. Because of several of these major efforts, a lot, funded by the Lyons Township Conservation Club, was purchased by the Save the Prairie Society in 1975.(5) Another lot was purchased by the La Grange Park Garden Club.

Parallel to the student group, the Save the Prairie Society began to publish brochures and to print

petitions. They also attended the Village of Westchester and Park district board meetings. Prairie walks and other events were organized.

In 1978, a chapter of the Save the Prairie Society was formed. This chapter, consisting of Westchester citizens and based in Westchester, possessed a stronger voice at village meetings. Village officials had previously claimed that citizens of Western Springs could not make zoning decisions for Village of Westchester citizens. The new chapter of the Society also began a publicity campaign of extensive news releases, planned prairie hikes, local library displays, and church gatherings. Members united to build and enter floats in the annual local parades such as the La Grange Pet Parade and Westchester Memorial Day and Fourth of July Parades. To commemorate Illinois Prairie Week, the Save the Prairie Society sponsors an annual Prairie Fest. The Fest features living history campsites, free prairie tours and educational activities designed to help children become aware of the prairie. The Hody Coyote Puppet Show is an example. Local and State politicians speak to participating citizens, and the media publicizes the event in the local newspapers.

In 1980, the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory determined that Wolf Road was a priority for preservation. In addition, about 70% of the prairie is flood plain and plays a valuable role in flood retention. Owners, resisting the assessment, claimed that the prairie could be developed in spite of its flood plain status. The issue of prairie preservation steadily developed from a general question of land preservation to a more focused debate on the type and extent of preservation. At present 50 acres are designated for preservation by joint purchase with the Illinois Department of Conservation, the Forest Preserve of Cook County, and private funds. Westchester's oldest house, built in 1852,(6) had been moved to the Wolf Road Prairie by the Westchester Historical Society in cooperation with the Save the Prairie Society. Property owners petitioned for improvements to the land, but the Village rejected the petition. These owners then filed suit. A recent appellate ruling was decided in favor of the Village. However, residential or other land use of the remaining, unprotected 30 acres is still considered a viable possibility. The State and County are presently acquiring portions of the prairie by condemnation. Under eminent domain, the State and County buy the land at fair market value for preservation and ultimate dedication as an Illinois Nature Preserve. Owners are contesting this action. They believe that the State is unjustly taking their land; that because this land is located near Oakbrook, a high revenue office building area and high-income suburb, that their land should be developed at higher value.

In 1984, State Representatives Judy Baar Topinka and Ted Leverenz co-sponsored a special \$250,000 appropriation for land purchase. This followed a \$350,000 special appropriation which initiated land purchase by the Illinois Department of Conservation.(7) With this funding, the prairie received statewide recognition and greater public support. In addition, private grants from foundations have enabled the Save the Prairie Society to purchase land.

At this stage in prairie preservation, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County has won its current condemnation case. The Save the Prairie Society hopes that land will soon be acquired from present

owners in a more rapid succession. Landowners, however, still have the right to appeal the jury's decision. The goal of the Save the Prairie Society is to privately buy as much land as possible, but to turn the prairie over to a major government body to own. The Save the Prairie Society will continue to manage the prairie on a volunteer basis.

Ashley Woods, a proposed development area near the prairie threatens the prairie's ecological stability. The prairie's main source of water comes from Ashley Woods; and a neighborhood sanitary landfill drains directly into trenches that lead into the prairie. It is feared by prairie professionals that the prairie's surface and ground waters may be contaminated by toxic substances leaching from the landfill. The prairie, however, will be severely altered if this main source of water, no matter how contaminated, is cut off by development. Prairie professionals are fully aware of this trade-off. But each independent preservation effort is one link in the worldwide chain to protect the world's natural resources. In this way, the prairie is an example issue. A natural area depends upon an upstream water source and is also impacted by possible contaminants and toxins. If this is happening in Westchester, it is happening elsewhere. The Save the Prairie Society calls for stricter legislation regulating landfills, wetlands, headwaters, rivers and streams.

Westchester held public hearings on the Ashley Woods issue. Another group in Westchester, Citizens for a Better Westchester, has joined in the efforts to educate the public to the dangers and risks of this project and the effects of the adjacent landfill. Both the Save the Prairie Society and the Citizens of Westchester are unsure of the action the Village Board will take on the issue. The President of the Board, who previously took a pro-preservation approach, seems impatient to push through development of the woods for revenue gain.

HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN THE FOUNDATION OF LAND VALUES

The dispute over Wolf Road Prairie preservation is an example of how religious and aesthetic values and attitudes, mixed with traditional property ownership values, confront contemporary environmental issues of open land preservation. From this conflict an overall land use ethic can evolve. This conflict is a direct example of combining both religious and secular American traditions into a process of decisionmaking. Commercial developers and private landowners who might gain personally and financially from developing the prairie voice traditional values of property rights. On the other hand, the Save the Prairie Society, its members, and some local residents, as well as the Illinois Department of Conservation, the Governor of Illinois, and Cook County Board members express strong interest in preserving the land for conservation and aesthetic reasons.

The Save the Prairie Society in its newsletter expounds on traditional American Indian beliefs toward the land. They quote Mike Regenfuss of American Indian Ancestry as stating:

. . . As the Creator made the earth filled with beautiful mountains, rivers and seas, forests, wetlands, and grasslands, he said to his wife, the earth, let us make love forever and from us life will flow. . . . My prayer is is [sic]--"Be good to life which flows within each and every day of earth's creatures."(8)

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, stewardship of the land is man's primary responsibility.(9) Wolf Road Prairie's management plans demonstrate stewardship as a central value. Furthermore, land can be valued for exploitation, development, or for serving "the needs of the human family."(10)

Preservation of American heritage is another value contributing to contemporary land use decisions. A series of land-related laws, beginning with the Pre-Emptions Acts of the 1830s and '40s to the Homestead Act of 1862 and other 20th century enactments, encourage ownership in family-sized land holdings.(11) In Westchester, this tradition is strongly expressed. People value having a home and demand them. Commercial developers respond to this demand.

ECONOMIC VALUES AFFECTING LAND DEVELOPMENT

Historical values on land ownership reflect in the economic values that a culture may espouse. But other economic factors may come into play, affecting the land use decisions a town may make. These factors relate to how residents work, shop, go to school, or travel from place to place.

In the case of Westchester and its desire to expand, questions remain unanswered. If a mall or residential housing were to be built on the prairie, what would be the incentive for attracting business? What kinds of business will be attracted? Is the number of jobs to be created enough to offset development costs and contribute significantly to the town's economy? Will increased residential housing units only serve to contribute to congestion?

Three out of five shopping malls in the area experience financial problems. Town governments in the area underestimated the outflow of consumers to larger malls and the ensuing threat to local business. But they are still hopeful that with an influx of new residents local shopping will increase. Might these new residents follow the overriding trend to drive out to the big malls? City planners and members of the Save the Prairie Society state that Westchester is a community to which expansion and development came too late. The Village waited too long to change the town's tax base. Therefore, other types of growth, other than traditional means, would be more favorable for Westchester's future. It is hoped that high-revenue office space would improve Westchester's tax base sufficiently to prevent the residential development of the remaining 30 acres of the prairie. In this case, a trade-off takes place. High-revenue office space, although improving Westchester's tax base may also create a sharp influx of office workers, traffic congestion, and severe ecological impacts on the prairie, if not total destruction.

In Room Enough: Housing and Open Space in the Bay Area, a report of the Housing/Greenbelt Program of People for Open Space, factors affecting housing supply are discussed. A decrease in family members per household contributes to changes in the housing market.(12) A second factor, speculation, also intensifies demand. As prices escalate, homeowners regard their homes as investments and stretch their incomes to buy new or larger homes, consuming less in other commercial sectors and contributing to rising prices for homes.(13)

Land constraints, which limit future supplies of land for housing and when met with sharp increases in employment growth for a particular area, can also

create stresses in housing demand.(14) At the same time, land constraints limiting housing in a town can push up the value of previously developed land.

Government subsidies for the expansion of infrastructure--roads, sewers, water lines--may also affect the cost of housing.(15) The \$10,000 per lot cost assessment for streets, utilities and sewer lines on the Prairie may actually be too low. Westchester would also have to build a reservoir for rainfall and flood control, increasing costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY AS ECONOMIC GROWTH

Often development-oriented individuals state that environmentalists are unwilling to compromise on development issues, because they may overestimate the fragility of ecosystems. Hidden within this assumption is another values decision on the part of these individuals; that we no longer live in a pristine environment and thus environmentalists that insist on preserving pristine environments demand too much from local governments with other priorities in mind. Environmentalists who have studied ecology are aware of the fragility of ecosystems because they have observed the effects of degradation on those systems.

Environmentalists are acutely aware of the restorative abilities of ecosystems--if proper mechanisms exist. The prairie is by no means a pristine ecological system. But it is pristine in that the soil has not been plowed. If weeds and shrubs were burnt back in spring or autumn, "prairie indicator" plants would grow back, eventually restoring Wolf Road Prairie to a near pristine state. Environmentalists recognize that growth means expansion, and that pieces of unique historic and aesthetically pleasing land are becoming rare or are threatened by toxic degradation. With this knowledge in mind, they work to save those pieces of land which are prioritized as most valuable in terms of endangered species or a particular historical heritage. The prairie preserves a vanishing, natural ecosystem which was once a part of Illinois history. The prairie covered over 30,000 square miles of Illinois. Today, less than one hundredth of a percent of original Illinois prairie has preserved status.(16) The benefits are educational, and they pertain to a cultural appreciation of beauty and history, and the need for preventing environmental degradation, values that do not outwardly come into play in a free market economy. Aesthetic appreciation, although difficult to measure in dollar terms, is another type of economic growth activity. It permits the growth of environmental quality which, in turn, fosters stable, economic growth. Both environmentalists and developers desire economic growth. The main question is: Which kind of growth benefits whom?

ANALYSIS OF CONFLICTING VALUES

There are alternative approaches to gaining ownership of the land for preservation purposes. These alternative approaches reflect a series of conflicting values in land use decisionmaking. Because the Save the Prairie Society is a not-for-profit organization, it can receive tax deductible donations. The Society could work to convince landowners to value their property at the market price, as determined by "willing sellers" and "willing buyers," to donate it, and then receive a sizeable tax deduction. This suggestion, however, does not seem applicable to the prairie and its preservation. Landowners still wish to receive top dollar and long-term returns on investment.

The Open Lands Project of Chicago suggests another alternative method in seeking preservation, that of providing a scenic easement. A scenic easement allows the owner to possess the land with the possibility of compensation. The land could then be dedicated to the Cook County Forest Preserve by the owner. Under a scenic easement, the owner could not develop the land; it would remain for use in "scenic appreciation." However, there are so many different prairie landowners that no one central body with the ecological expertise to properly care for it would be responsible. This method also does not appear to be applicable to the prairie preservation issue.

The Save the Prairie Society favors State and County condemnation of the land. Given the complex network of landowners and the necessity to take action before developers move in, State and County condemnation would be the most effective way to preserve the prairie.

But the condemnation issue is a source of great conflict in the community. Landowners are definitely hostile. Families of present day owners, at some earlier time, had invested in the land with hopes of greater return on investment as new suburbs developed. These owners are exercising their rights to property which, under the Fifth Amendment, "shall not be taken for public use without just compensation."(17) One landowner, who, expecting windfall profits from developing the area, mortgaged his house to buy plots from a convincing friend. He faces severe financial losses if the State were to condemn the land and take it. He is suing the State of Illinois on the grounds of "just compensation."

At a past Prairie Fest, this hostility reached a climax. Individual landowners picketed the Fest with painted signs stating "Prairie Society--Communist Draft Dodgers" and "Land Grabbing is Un-American."(18) In a dramatic way landowners were seeking what they believe to be just compensation for the land.

In Westchester, overriding attitudes exist toward environmental issues that will serve as driving forces for future environmental decisionmaking. These attitudes rest on three major assumptions. Within these assumptions are values of free market pragmatism and how people wish to see Westchester develop. The first assumption is that for an industrial society, economic development and growth are essential. Humankind, in its efforts to manipulate and conquer the wilderness, is predestined in its activities to develop the land. Yet, this assumption does not allow for the fact that for the first time humankind is aware of its position in history, that it is most aware of the negative effects of industrialization of the environment, that it can exert some control over the science of manipulating the environment, and that it has the ability to influence the future. The major question remains: Is development as an economic activity desired over another kind of economic activity, land preservation? Commercial development will, in the short run, reap high profits to those few who stand to benefit. Open land preservation will, in the long run, offer aesthetic benefits and increased value of land to the community.

Secondly, economic growth is considered in absolute terms of spatial expansion. One is assuming that a town grows if it takes up more space. This may be true in terms of population growth. But growth can

also mean the creation of a series of economic relationships with different levels of commercial interaction. In only considering the expansion-as-growth assumption, fundamental cultural and community-oriented relationships, which can also create growth are overlooked.

Benefits of open space are the following:

Providing open space is important economically. The "... ability to attract business is in large part attributable to the vitality and beauty of its natural environment."(19)

Preserved open space "becomes an integral part of the ... urban system like transportation and other basic facilities; a thing of irreplaceable value representing a major investment, which is in the public interest to maintain."(20)

In light of these benefits, the Prairie's preservation serves to maintain Westchester's identity, fostering civic pride among citizens. Because it is a wealth of historical, ecological, and cultural knowledge, the prairie is an educational investment for the future.

The Third assumption relies on the "boom and bust" approach to economic growth. The long-lasting growth of a more stable nature can account for fluctuations in the economy to assure greater economic stability for the community.

The suburbs of Chicago are interconnected by economy and ecology. A large area of open land will conserve the natural functions of the land and guarantee a system of cities that can prosper in the future. Westchester can become a forerunner of a different type of local development by expressing both economic and ecological values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although land use values may sharply conflict, the core issue of the prairie is not one just between environmentalists and developers. Whatever decision is made, all citizens in Westchester and the surrounding towns will be affected. The predicament of the prairie is an example of an even larger problem faced in many suburbs of large cities in the nation and the world. The desire for open space and environmental quality conflicts with the belief in healthy economic growth and expansion.

To keep a variety of options open, the Save the Prairie Society can do the following to preserve all 80 acres of Wolf Road Prairie:

- (1) To accomplish State dedication of all 80 acres and Ashley Woods as an Illinois Nature Preserve.
- (2) To act as an educator of ecological, historical, and cultural benefits that the prairie offers to the community; to ensure that these benefits will in the long run create a level of environmental quality enhancing the area.
- (3) To work for stricter legislation regulating landfills, wetlands, headwaters, rivers, and streams.
- (4) To unite neighboring communities and citizens of all ages to work for preservation.
- (5) To manage fundraising campaigns.

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- (6) To communicate to key politicians how the prairie enhances the environmental quality of Westchester, the County, and the State.
 - (7) To design a prairie management plan including the following:
 - (a) To return Ashley Woods to as near a pristine state as possible for use as a buffer zone;
 - (b) To study the wetlands area to understand its role in the prairie;
 - (c) To maintain a database of flora and fauna identified in the prairie;
 - (d) To assess the extent of landfill pollution; and
 - (e) To maintain the farmhouse in as historically correct condition as possible.

The following factors can be useful in assessing development in Westchester:

- (1) To consider whether new housing will change the physical character of a town and to allow for environmental limitations to certain types of development.
- (2) To gather demographic data on the number of family members per household.
- (3) To find land with roads, sewers, and gas lines, which has already been set aside for development.

CONCLUSION

To achieve open space preservation, citizens must work to develop plans with city officials by participating in the democratic process. Prairie preservation allows for maintaining the environmental quality of Westchester. In the long run, Westchester will be a more desirable place to live, a basic factor in economic stability. In this way, ecologic and economic values converge. If citizens in Westchester and nearby towns value the ecological, historical, and cultural merits of the prairie, then they will organize to express these values. This is what is meant by the cultural dynamic. Wolf Road Prairie preservation then becomes an example for establishing a land use ethic in the Chicago area, the nation and the world.

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