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Tour of ex-raceway pitches parks bond sale

By Dave Gathman
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Carpentersville

In the past, these woods roared with Ferraris and Porsches spinning around a 3.27-mile Monza track while 150,000 spectators peered across safety barriers to see who drove fastest.

In the present, the crumbling track is overarched by oaks and walnuts and wildflowers, and the trails where throngs once trod are narrow, deeply rutted cuts through deep woods.

In the future, what once was known as Meadowdale International Raceway could be turned into another spread of tract housing. Or part of it could become a publicly owned park, available for hiking and nature classes and cross-country skiing.

Lobbying for the latter fate, Dundee Township Park District officials and environmental activists led

■ Opponents of a massive annexation proposal for Carpentersville filled the village hall and presented petitions at a public hearing Tuesday / 3

the press on a tour of the old raceway property Tuesday and answered questions about a Nov. 3 referendum on the site's future.

Dundee Township voters will be asked to authorize the park district to sell up to \$1.5 million worth of bonds. Proceeds would be used to buy 50 acres of the heavily wooded northern end of the 230-acre former raceway, which lies north and west of the intersection of Illinois 31 and Huntley Road.

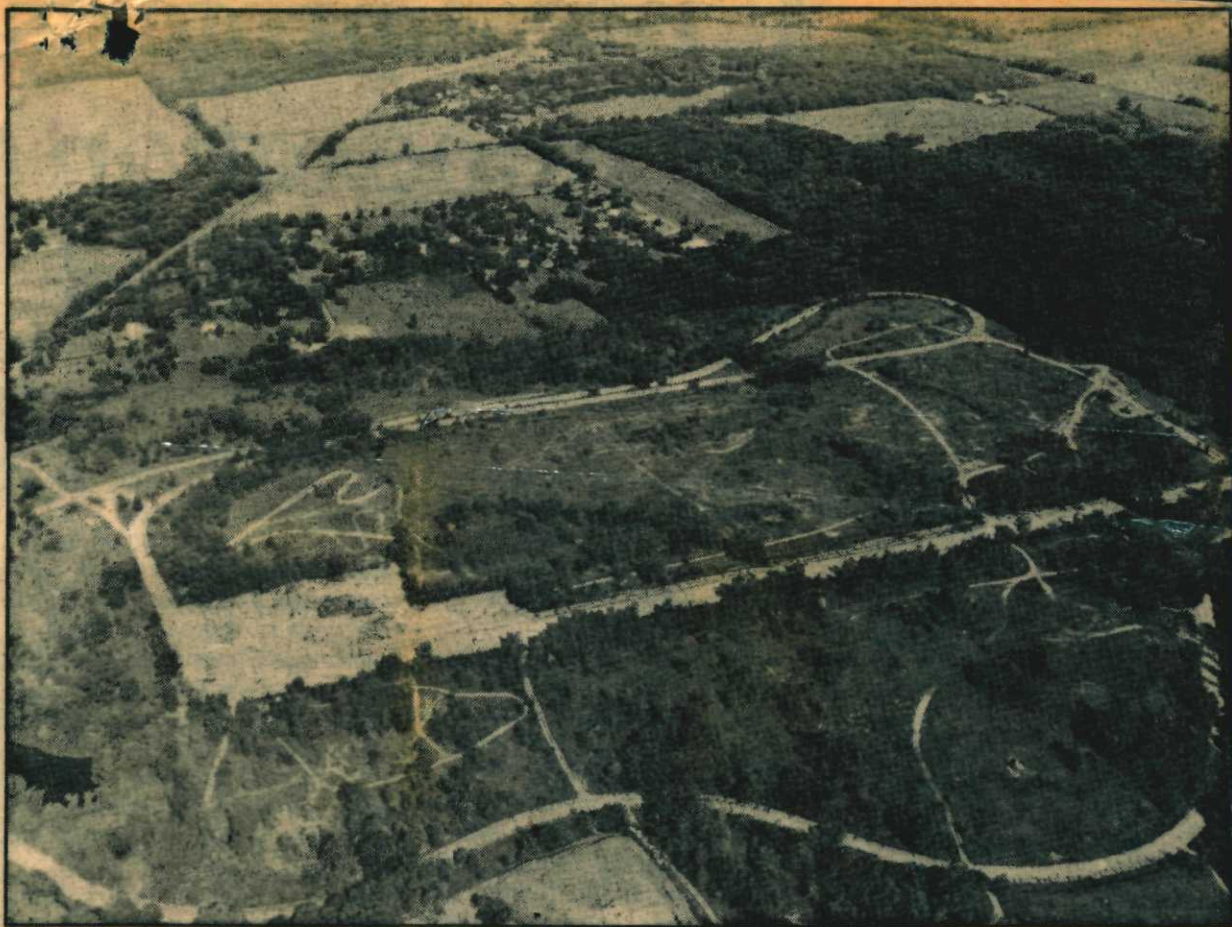
The activists and park officials hope that purchase of those 50 acres will persuade the Kane County Forest Preserve District to buy another 50 acres, creating a 100-acre nature preserve.

Rick Bemm, director of the park district, says the land is still owned by the estate of the late Meadowdale developer and race track impresario Leonard Besinger. Bemm said Besinger's heirs are offering the land at \$30,000 an acre.

Bemm said the bond sale would raise taxes \$3.50 a year on a home with a market value of \$80,000, and about \$8 for a home valued at \$200,000.

The Besinger clan was represented on the tour by Leonard Besinger's grandson, Frank Scarpelli. Scarpelli said the land has been for sale, for the right price, ever since the track went out of business in 1969, after an unprofitable 11 years of racing. But the family put up "for sale" signs earlier this year, and chances the site will finally be developed seem increased now that the Carpentersville Village Board is considering a proposal to develop the surrounding

♦ See Raceway on page A4



FILE PHOTO / THE COURIER-NEWS

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tract housing, or a publicly owned park for hiking and nature classes and cross-country skiing.

Raceway

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1,048 vacant acres.

The former raceway is already annexed to Carpentersville. It is zoned for industrial use, Scarpelli said.

The steep, rutted property is all but impassable to anything except four-wheel-drive vehicles now, and much of the old track itself has been reduced to gravel. Scarpelli explains that his family allowed an asphalt company to break up and carry off much of the pavement as road aggregate. After passing beneath a pedestrian overpass—black with rust now and missing its walking surface—the track ends completely at one point as the land falls almost straight down into a yawning 50-foot deep and 50-foot-wide ravine.

June Keibler, who lives nearby and has been walking these woods for years, points out wild flowers as the party climbs the steep, rutted, muddy trails. "That's Joe Pye weed," she says. "It was named after an Indian who taught settlers they could cure fever with it."

As the group passes one of several small wetlands, Keibler points out swamp milkweed, tussock sedge and swamp goldenrod. "This is jump weed—you see how the seeds seem to jump off the stem when you pull on them?"

That group of trees nearby once held 26 blue heron nests, Keibler adds. But then some owls set up housekeeping in a nearby tree, and there went the

neighborhood. Their young snatched out of their nests, the herons sought a new rookery. But herons are still seen on the property. The owls are still there and red tail hawks are common, she says. The grass in this wetland has been smashed down by deer.

Dundee Township voters gave thumbs down three years ago on a referendum which would have set up an open space preservation district with power to buy the raceway and similar undeveloped property. But Bemm thinks a better indication of people's feelings is last fall's referendum in which voters approved the park district's \$4.99 million purchase of Bonnie Dundee Golf Club.

"The open space district vote was close. I think people felt the \$20 million bond issue involved in that was overwhelming," says Bemm. "But the Bonnie Dundee referendum is an indication of how important open space is to the people of Dundee Township. Also, when the open space referendum was held, we hadn't had the influx of developments we've had lately."

"This is an idea whose time has come," says Keibler, who along with friends Bellita Jacobsen, Donna Veeneman and Charlene Marek, has been fighting to "save" the raceway for five years.

Keibler said the ad hoc group has approached everyone from the park district and forest preserve district to Illinois Department of Conservation and The Nature Conservancy. She said the forest preserve district has the raceway on its list of desirable sites to purchase, but has not felt able to afford buying a whole 100 acres on its own.