

The Evening Sun - Norwich takes renewed interest in Hillcrest

By: Melissa Stagnaro, Sun Staff Writer

Published: February 21st, 2011

NORWICH — The Norwich City School District is exploring options to revitalize Hillcrest Conservation Park.

Last week, the district's board of education tasked Superintendent Gerard O'Sullivan with investigating the possibility of using BOCES resources to reclaim the property so that it may become, once again, an outdoor education resource for Norwich's Students

The 56 acre parcel, situated off Manley Road on West Hill, was deeded to the district in the 1950's as a "forever wild" outdoor educational laboratory.

While the property was once well utilized by the district, "it has fallen into disuse over the years," said Board Member Perry Owen, who brought the matter before his peers last Monday.

According to Owen, he and Superintendent Gerard O'Sullivan met with community members who feel Hillcrest should be revived.

He said the renewed interest in the park was sparked by a proposal submitted last August by Fr. Harry Winter, a 1955 graduate of Norwich. The report, which was distributed to board members, detailed the history of the property and supported the educational benefits of its use once more. It included an extensive amount of information in the form of newspaper clippings, yearbook entries and other documents supporting the park's merit and educational value.

"I recommend pursuing this," stated O'Sullivan, who said he hiked around the property in mid-November to see the condition of the trails for himself. He also mentioned the possibility of working with the Conservation program at DCMO BOCES to reclaim the trails which have become overgrown.

If revitalized, he said, "It may be a win-win for a lot of different groups."

Board Member Sally Chirlin brought forward a motion to direct the superintendent to further investigate the possibilities.

"I think that the school district at large utilized it well," she said, speaking in support of the park.

While Board Member Priscilla Johnson questioned the district resources which would have to be expended, Owen said there could be a potential for generating revenue from the property. Surrounding landowners have leased their natural gas rights, he explained, and the district could stand to benefit if wells are drilled in the vicinity.

"I think we should sit back and keep our eyes and ears open to see if we can benefit," Owen said.