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FAW wilderness proposal gaining support

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The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness proposal seeking wilderness designation for certain areas of the Allegheny National Forest has gained the endorsement of nearly 50 organizations from around the country and local region.

The most recent addition to the growing list of those in support of setting aside ANF land for this highest level of protection only to be granted by an act of Congress comes from the Elk Township Historical Society.

At a meeting earlier this month, the society's board voted unanimously to endorse the proposal which was first published by FAW, a Warren-based non-profit organization, almost nine years ago.

Dr. Julie Lindblom Boozer, a board member of the Elk Township Historical

Society, said the group endorsed the Citizens' Wilderness Proposal in full, but is most acutely interested in two of the proposed forest reserves located in Elk Township.

These are the 3,022-acre proposed Cornplanter Wilderness Area between the Webb's Ferry boat launch and Camp Olmstead and the 4,752-acre proposed Scandia National Recreation Area covering most of Camp Olmstead to the Kinzua Dam.

"Our overall goal is to preserve the heritage of Elk Township, but I feel — and apparently the board does too — that our heritage goes beyond restoring a wooden building," Boozer told *The Era* Friday. "Our forest and wildlife are vital components of Elk Township's natural history and ecological heritage as well."

She said these areas are representative of the type of landscape Swedish

immigrants first discovered when they settled in the township, and for this reason hold a historical value as well.

"The Swedish immigrants of Scandinavia came here for the clean water, trees and woodland setting and rolling hills that looked like southern Sweden where they came from," Boozer explained. "I would like to see that heritage preserved because (the proposed areas) are pretty undisturbed and look like what they would have when they first came here."

"The woodland and wildlife — that's why we live here and that should continue so that future generations can come here to live for the very same reason," she added.

The Cornplanter and Scandia proposed wilderness areas make up the west shore of the Allegheny Reservoir

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which has been the focus of several attempts over the decades as a location for massive commercial development.

In the 1960s, Warren County Commissioners commissioned a report that outlined "maximum commercial development (including) golf courses, airports, hotels, resorts — the works," according to FAW Executive Director Kirk Johnson.

"It comes up from time to time," Johnson said. "There are very focused locations along the Allegany Reservoir where some development would probably be okay such as the Kinzua Beach area and Willow Bay which are already developed — but it probably shouldn't expand beyond those two existing locations."

He pointed out that Kinzua Beach and Willow Bay already have developed facilities, water and electrical service, paved access from Route 59 and other qualities that would eliminate the need for major infrastructure investments if someone should want to expand on them rather than develop wilderness quality areas elsewhere in the forest.

The proposal outlines a total of eight tracts of land comprising a total of 54,460 acres that retain

enough of their original composition to make them eligible for wilderness designation. The Forest Service has recommended two of the proposed areas, Chestnut Ridge and Minister Valley, to Congress in support of their sought wilderness designation, but Congress has not reacted, Johnson relayed.

Chestnut Ridge represents 5,191 acres along the north branch of Sugar Run east of Route 321 in Corydon Township, and Minister Valley comprises 7,390 acres off of Route 666 south of Sheffield.

With the wilderness recommendation by the Forest Service — made part of the ANF's 2007 Forest Plan — these two areas have become "in essence de facto wilderness areas," Johnson said.

"They almost have to be treated as designated wilderness areas either until Congress acts and designates them or until the forest plan is revised again," he continued. "It's important to understand that the approval of the agency, in this case the forest service, is not a prerequisite to getting an area designated wilderness, but it can usually be pretty helpful."

According to Johnson, Congress can put forth a bill and pass a wilderness designation any time, and such does not have to coincide with any standing forest plan.

Currently, less than two percent of the ANF has been designated wilderness at a total of about 9,000 acres split between the Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands wilderness areas.

"Having wilderness areas draw people in from far outside the region," Johnson stated. "The ANF is located within a day's drive of one-third of the nation's populations. (Eco-tourism) drawing people in to visit wilderness areas has the effect of being very beneficial to local businesses."