



Zionsville Parks Foundation

preserve • enhance • grow

Dear Town Council members:

I am writing on behalf of the Zionsville Parks Foundation to express our strong support for the appropriation of \$2.5 million in grant funds received from the State of Indiana's Department of Nature Resources by the Zionsville Town Council for the Carpenter Nature Preserve.

Summary

The Zionsville Parks Foundation was established as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2021 as a friend-raising and fund-raising organization supporting parks and greenspace in Zionsville. Part of our mission has been to attract private philanthropy to the Carpenter Nature Preserve (CNP) to amplify the scope of what promises to be a premier nature destination in the region. Town Council and others planning the unique public/private financing of CNP have from early days included substantial state conservation grants in the costs of acquiring and developing CNP.

With that understanding, the Foundation has made remarkable progress in attracting donors - individuals, corporations and foundations - to the project. A failure by the Town Council to appropriate grant funds obtained by the effort of the Zionsville Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks Department) expressly for CNP will upend the very reasonable expectations under which the Foundation's donors have made their commitments. Such a failure would put these commitments at risk and impact our ability to attract future commitments. Failure to appropriate the funds for CNP also risks forfeiture of the DNR grants.

Background

A history of the project may be helpful. In March of 2021, the Zionsville Board of Parks and Recreation (Park Board) entered into a Letter of Intent with local residents, philanthropists and conservationists, Jim and Nancy Carpenter, to explore transforming the abandoned Wolf Run Golf Course into a public nature park and preserve. As contemplated, the Carpenters would purchase the property and sell it to the Town of Zionsville at a considerable discount so that the Town would be eligible as owners of the property to apply for conservation grants with the DNR. Everyone understood that any grant proceeds awarded in connection with this project would be used for the future CNP.

During the fall of 2021 to the spring of 2022, the Park Board asked the Parks Department to engage in an extensive master planning process for the property/park. The planning process included robust public and stakeholder consultation, including the discussion of potential grants that could be awarded. The process ended with a plan for phased development of the property into a public nature preserve which by then was being called “Carpenter Nature Preserve.” The Park Board approved the CNP Master Plan and incorporated its essentials into its overall 5-Year Plan for 2023-2028 (also approved by Town Council).

In 2023, the Carpenters committed to sell the 215-acre former golf course, which was appraised at \$6,020,000, to the Town for \$4,520,000. Key components of this transaction were that the land remain a public nature preserve and that DNR grant proceeds be utilized to develop the preserve.

A critical piece of the financing occurred in May of 2023, when Town Council voted 6-1 to approve a \$5.5 million bond to cover the cost of purchasing the property, along with engineering, surveys and construction documents for the first phase of construction. The bond issue garnered significant public support in the form of letters and public comment. The Town’s purchase of the property was completed in the autumn of 2023.

As owners of the property, the Town was eligible to apply for several conservation grants. Not surprisingly, given the great ecological value of the land, CNP was awarded a) a \$3 million Next Level Conservation Trust grant; b) a \$500,000 Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant; and c) a multi-million dollar, ten-year commitment by DNR under the DNR-managed Indiana Stream and Wetlands Mitigation Program to repair, improve and maintain the floodplain and Eagle Creek riparian way throughout the property.

Grant Proceeds Are Needed Now to Open CNP under the Terms of DNR Grants to Avoid Forfeitures

One of the conditions of the Next Level and LWCF grants is that a public park open within a reasonable amount of time. The LWCF grant is a reimbursement for actual construction costs and requires construction to be complete and the preserve to be open to the public within three years of grant execution. No development or construction obviously means no grant monies as contemplated under the LWCF grant.

And the Next Level grant, despite already being paid, also requires under its terms for the subject parklands/preserve, in this case CNP, to open to the public with a reasonable time. In addition to risking forfeiture of the LWCF monies, failure to complete planned “Phase 1” development of basic infrastructure risks forfeiture and repayment of the Next Level grant funds.

[Note that in addition to requiring opening the property to the public, both grants required that conservation easements preserving the land in perpetuity be established, which easements the Park Board approved in late 2024.]

Failure to Appropriately for CNP Upsets and Breaches Private Commitments Made for the Benefit of CNP and the Town

In reliance on the use of DNR grants being used for CNP, both the Town and the Zionsville Parks Foundation have identified and successfully secured significant sources of additional private funding for CNP. These commitments have been made assuming, reasonably, that the LWCF and Next Level grant funds would be applied to CNP to fulfill the vision of the Master Plan. These commitments to the Foundation, and correspondingly from the Foundation to the Park Board, include:

- A \$500,000 Habitat Restoration Fund established by the Carpenters under a 3-way Memorandum of Understanding dated October 3, 2024, among the Park Board, the Carpenters and the Foundation; and
- Over \$300,000 in firm commitments from individuals and corporate donors (much of which has already been paid by the Foundation to the Parks Department) earmarked for amenities such as a nature playground, an amphitheater, an outdoor classroom, a wetland boardwalk and a wildlife blind.

In securing these commitments, the Foundation has established valuable relationships - not just with the Carpenters - but with other prestigious corporate and philanthropic funders such as the Efroymson Family Fund, the Duke Energy Foundation, and Eli Lilly & Company. To change now or deny use of DNR grant funds always earmarked for developing CNP and getting it open to the public would be a stark breach of trust and jeopardize the Foundation's and the Town's future relationships with these partners and funders - as well as possibly upsetting existing commitments still outstanding.

Conclusion

The Carpenter Nature Preserve promises to be the crowning jewel of our town's park system. It represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to preserve and protect natural habitats along the Eagle Creek corridor in an area of rapid development and to use this remarkable property as a living classroom for future generations. Now that the grant proceeds from the DNR Next Level grant have been deposited in the Town's account, we respectfully ask Town Council to approve a \$2.5 million appropriation for the Parks Department to utilize these funds as intended - to make the Carpenter Nature Preserve open and accessible to the public.

Sincerely yours,

Tim Casady
President
Zionsville Parks Foundation