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Ribbon cut on Syndicate Park project to preserve sand dunes, houses

By BECKY KARK - For The Herald-Palladium Nov 10, 2017 Updated Nov 10, 2017



Retired Van Buren County Administrator Doug Cultra stands atop the Syndicate Park dune to enjoy the view. Cultra was county administrator when efforts began to preserve the dune and slow down its advancement toward homes in the Syndicate Park subdivision.

Becky Kark / For The Herald-Palladium

SOUTH HAVEN — You can't stop a sand dune from moving. Just ask South Haven Township resident Bruce Sirius.

Sirius and his neighbors in the Syndicate Park subdivision live next to 7.6 acres of dune hovering close to their homes. Two of the homes were destroyed several years ago by the advancing mounds of sand.

"Mother Nature pushes this thing wherever it wants to go," Sirius said.

However, a group has been pushing back, which has resulted in a coordinated governmental and subdivision effort to preserve the dune and the neighboring houses.

The group met Thursday at the foot of the dune for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the accomplishments made so far to prevent the dune from encroaching further into the subdivision.

“We’re not going to stop the dune from moving, but we can slow it down,” said Marcy Hamilton, senior planner for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, which helped to coordinate the project.

The restoration project included the elimination of 30 trails people reached on foot or by riding off-road vehicles to climb to the top of the dune and then down to Lake Michigan.

Now there is just one multi-use trail, which has been widened to 10 feet with fences on either side to create easier access to the top of the dune for ORVs. There are also two walking trails – one near the multi-use trail and the other to the south.

By eliminating the informal trails, vegetation will be able to grow again, Hamilton said. More vegetation has also been planted as part of the dune restoration project.

The restoration results are starting to show.

“People understand the importance of restoring the dune. There’s very little traffic on that hill,” Sirius said referring to the multi-use trail.

The dune is along the lake shore between Van Buren State Park and North Pointe Preserve. Efforts to restore the dune began in 2011 when Van Buren County officials asked the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission to undertake a study to determine the best way to stop the dune from destroying houses. The study recommended the county restore and stabilize the dune area.

But that was easier said than done.

The county owned some of the land, but not all. So in 2014 it began buying sections of the land that was privately owned. Many of the parcels the county bought had been tax-reverted because nothing could be built on them.

While the county bought lots, the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission began applying for grants to restore the dune.

Grants, totaling \$70,000, came from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality’s Coastal Zone Management Program and the Office of Great Lakes, while matching funds came from the county and the Van Buren Conservation District.

Van Buren County Board of Commissioners Chairman Dick Godfrey was on hand Thursday for the ribbon-cutting ceremony, along with other county officials.

“I’d like to thank all the partners that worked on this project,” he said. “It’s amazing we got this accomplished.”

But the Syndicate Park subdivision residents and governmental groups who helped make the restoration possible know that work still lies ahead.

“We’d like to do some more plantings,” Hamilton said. The trails and fencing also will need to be maintained routinely. “We’re going to try for some more grant funding.”

Sirus hopes the preservation efforts continue.

“We have to stay active or it will all go back to the way it was,” he said.