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3. PARKS: Ill. considers swapping public grasslands for resort development (06/14/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Illinois lawmakers have given a first round of approval to a plan that would trade as much as one quarter of Pyramid State Park -- the state's largest park and considered an important habitat for migrating birds -- to a real-estate development firm that envisions a premium golf resort and bicycle racing complex as a precursor to a musical heritage theme park on the site.

Although the developer, the Toney Watkins Co., had been promoting its plan for another part of the state, it recently approached lawmakers with the proposal to swap 2,000 acres of lands within Pyramid State Park for an equivalent amount of land south of the park, plus \$1 million. A subsequent transaction would involve another 3,000 acres, according to reports.

The deal was described in an amendment to proposed legislation, **S.B. 778**, introduced by state Sen. Dan Reitz (D) of Steeleville last week. According to the provision, the resort development will involve a \$100 million investment and create 2,500 jobs in economically depressed Perry County. The main part of the proposed bill involves minor transfers of state Department of Transportation lands for highway projects.

Chris McCloud, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, which oversees state parks, told *Land Letter* that the agency has taken no position on the deal. "The bill just gives us permission to sit down and find out what the developer intends. We don't have a position one way or another. We don't know anything yet."

Geri Boyer, president of Kaskaskia Engineering Group, who is leading the development project for Toney Watkins Co., said that the firm is looking to build a destination resort that will include housing, a golf academy and course, and a bike racing track -- as a first development phase. A later phase would involve an entertainment center that promotes music of all genres, she said.

"We need a large tract of land in southern Illinois," Boyer said. The company had been exploring property closer to St. Louis but could not put together the right package. "Most of the land had been mined previously or still has coal resources," she said. "Many properties had been swallowed up by hunting clubs."

She said that the state park land, which was also the former site of a mine that had been sold to the state seven years ago, "is just sitting there, off the tax roles." The land that the company has proposed in exchange is about three miles from the park and is equivalent in value, worth about \$10 million to \$15 million, Boyer said.

But the company has proposed cleaning up the site in addition to making a cash payment as part of the exchange.

Others, however, see a different kind of value in the park. Stephen Packard, director of the Audubon Society of Chicago's branch, said Pyramid State Park is one of the last remaining expanses of grassland habitat left in the state. "This land is an important high-quality habitat. The land they are talking about trading is unreclaimed strip mine. It is utterly not equivalent



The Northern Harrier is just one of dozens of birds that populate the restored grasslands at Pyramid State Park. The Audubon Society considers the park an important bird habitat, but a developer wants to turn its core into a huge golf and entertainment complex. Photo by Diane McAllister. Courtesy of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

land," he said. Though the site of a former strip mine, the park has been restored and converted to grassland, hayland and pastures.

In addition, he said, the land that the company wants is "right in the middle of the state park. What's critical to the animals is to have is a large expanse." Grassland birds are able to reproduce only when there is sufficient acreage because they nest on the ground and need lots of space or else they are totally vulnerable to predators, he added.

Surveys have shown the park supports dozens of types of birds, including bald eagles, peregrine falcons, northern harriers, ospreys, sandhill cranes and several types of owls, as well as at least 500 Henslow's sparrows. During spring and autumn migrations, tens of thousands of waterfowl stop in the area to take advantage of 500 acres of lakes and wetlands in the 19,700-acre park.

Audubon and other environmental groups were rallying opposition to the deal, as it moved from a committee and into consideration by the full Senate later this week. "I would predict that enough people are up in arms that it will be sloughed off as a mistake," Packard said.

A spokeswoman for Sen. Reitz's office this week told *Land Letter* that "the only reason we considered the land exchange is for economic development. Any proposal has to be in the best interest of the state, and we'd only use Pyramid Park as a last resort." She said Sen. Reitz still believes the Toney Watkins Co. can find private lands for its development.

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