

Environment

"This place is a treasure box that hasn't even been inventoried. It would be such a shame to throw it away." — Naturalist James Zimmerman

By ROSEMARY KENDRICK
Capital Times Staff Writer

City officials are embroiled in an intense debate over whether the city should cooperate with the University of Wisconsin and private groups in providing money to purchase and preserve the Lower Eagle Heights Woods.

The 3.4 acres in question, just east of The Cove condominiums, is a heavily wooded parcel sloping sharply from Lake Mendota Drive down to Lake Mendota.

Naturalists say the site has significant ecological, scientific and community value and should be preserved — while owner Gerald Welch asserts that years of city delays have cost him money and he should be allowed to proceed with residential development.

Environmentalists point out that Lower Eagle Heights Woods is the last relatively untouched piece of Lake Mendota shoreline in the city of Madison.

"One can seek peace here and feel a oneness with nature and the past," says well-known naturalist James Zimmerman.

Zimmerman has been visiting the woods since 1936, when he first studied biology as a boy. He views the parcel as a unique opportunity to learn how nature behaves without human intervention — and he has led the crusade to save the woods through joint public/private purchase.

Zimmerman and other environmentalists point out these facts in arguing their case:

- The property contains a rich and unusual variety of plant species, including moonseed vine, red elderberry, white pea, hepatica, may apples, bloodroots, showy orchis and morel mushrooms. Zimmerman has identified 84 species of flowering plants on the site and there probably are more.

Donald Waller, UW assistant professor of botany, points to a "rich layer of wildflowers and other ground flora," with lichens growing here that occur only rarely or not at all elsewhere in the state.

- Many types of trees, including red oak, basswood, sugar maple, ash and red cedar grace the land.
- The woods is a haven for animals and birds. Owls, wood ducks, swallows, woodpeckers, deer and other species enjoy the quiet setting.

Naturalists say the property has special value as a teaching area because of its convenient location near the UW and west-side schools. Furthermore, they assert, its diverse flora can provide a gene bank and its relatively undisturbed condition can provide a yardstick for restoration attempts at more-traveled areas. The steep grade, lakeshore location and adjoining UW open space add to its appeal.

Construction, opponents argue, would chase away wildlife, destroy one-third to one-half of the site's vegetation outright, lead to subsequent damage from runoff and erosion and add sediment and nutrients to the lake.

Diane Chambliss Derouen, chairwoman of the Madison Audubon Society's Eagle Heights Woods Committee, says development "would harm the entire woodland area, would adversely affect the lake through increased eutrophication and would almost certainly result in violations of (the city's) new erosion control ordinance."

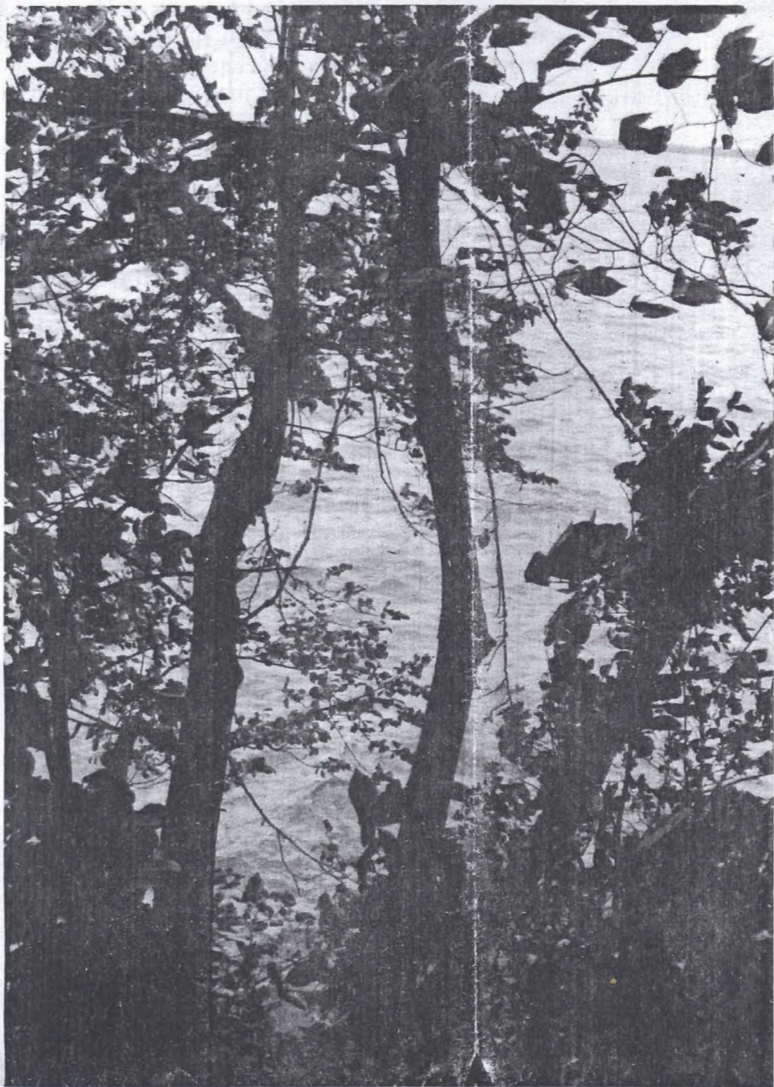
Waller sums up the environmentalists' view of the site this way:

"It represents a unique remnant of the much more extensive woods that once existed in the area... The city of Madison is known for its spectacular natural setting and we have a responsibility to preserve as much of it as possible."

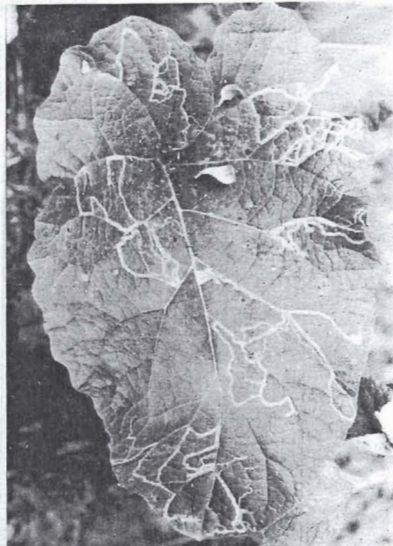
The issue could come to a head Monday, when the city plan commission is scheduled to vote on whether to grant a conditional-use permit for development of a duplex on one of the three lots. The meeting begins at 5:30 p.m. in Room 201 of the City-County Building.

Photos by
DAVID SANDELL

Conservationists try to save woodland treasure



Sometimes the foliage is so heavy that you can barely see Lake Mendota, even when you're very close.



How many people take the time to stop and look at the patterns on a leaf?



An scorpion trapped in a spider web. It won't stay there forever but in the time frame of short-lived insects, a few weeks is pretty close to forever.