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1 message

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Fleming Road residents file conservation easements
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[PHOTO] Mary Moltmann (left) and Ed Bennett of Bull Valley stand in front of a 200-year-old white oak tree Monday. Nine conservation easements have been filed by residents living along Fleming Road to protect their property. (Stephanie Janisch – sjanisch@nwherald.com)

BULL VALLEY – Nestled in the heart of McHenry County runs Fleming Road, a tree-lined passageway for travelers looking to avoid busy interstates.

Residents living along the road doggedly are trying to protect its 200-year-old oaks, winding turns and rolling hills, which many consider a county treasure.

Landowners along Fleming Road formed a group called The Fleming Road Alliance and have filed nine conservation easements through The Land Conservancy of McHenry County's Natural Heritage Corridor program.

Those who filed the easements hope that when the county rehabilitates the road, work will be done in a way that will keep the road in line with its natural landscape.

"We think that these sorts of things are land forms worth preserving to be true to the heritage of this county," said Mary Moltmann, who has lived along Fleming Road for 13 years with her husband, Ed Bennett. "We think it would be a shame to just flatten the hills, even out the curves, or straighten this winding road because this is part of the heritage that gives our county a sense of history."

The McHenry County Division of Transportation began studying the 2½-mile stretch of road, from Route 120 to Country Club Road, because the pavement has failed, MCDOT Design Manager Wally Dittrich said.

"For those of us who live on this road, it's upsetting," Moltmann said. "We see this road as a way to get to our home."

The lack of defined ditches, poor drainage, pavement condition, and age of the road make the road a target for county rehabilitation efforts. Fleming Road is the only posted road in the county where trucks larger than 8 tons cannot travel.

"First and foremost, the road is falling apart; we have to do something out there," Dittrich said. "We have the road posted at 8

tons for a reason.”

The conservation easements, filed in late December, extend 20 feet from the edge of the roadway into a landowner's property and will protect the roadway in perpetuity. The conservation easements are held by TLC, the landowners, and the village of Bull Valley. In order for the roadway to be widened, all three parties have to agree on any sale of property within each easement.

However, protecting the road is not all about saving the trees, TLC Executive Director Lisa Haderlein said. It is about maintaining the character of the road through the improvement process.

“It's not just a pretty road,” Haderlein said. “[Fleming Road] goes through one of the most natural, resource-rich areas of the county.”

The easements will protect sensitive groundwater areas along the road, Haderlein said. About 1½ miles of Fleming Road run through a portion of the Boone Creek Fen Groundwater area.

While some see Fleming Road as a scenic road worthy of protection, others see it as a safety hazard, with narrow passages, daunting trees, steep hills and steep shoulders.

Jeff Zapchenk travels Fleming Road at least two times a day to get to work from his home in an unincorporated area near Woodstock. Zapchenk and many other Fleming Road travelers use the road as a cut-through to avoid busy interstates.

“The reality is, if you go down that road and if it's slick and if you hit the tree, the tree is going to win,” Zapchenk said.

No one at the Fleming Road Alliance disagreed that the road is in need of repair. Pavement has reached the end of its useful life and the road is ridden with potholes.

“We are mindful of safety issues, but we are firm in our position that the road can be made safe while still preserving this lovely type of road,” Moltmann said.

Dittrich didn't rule out potentially flattening Fleming Road hills; however, McDOT is not looking at making Fleming Road larger than a two-lane thoroughfare. Any rehabilitation projects are in the preliminary stages, he added.

“We've made it clear from day one this is not about adding capacity or extending Fleming Road,” Dittrich said. “This first and foremost is about the rehabilitation of the road.”

In addition to the nine easements already filed, there are 39 more properties in the village of Bull Valley along Fleming Road, of which at least 20 landowners are moving through the legal process of filing the easements. Additionally, there are another 20 properties along the road that aren't in the village, and nine easements are in process. The easements cost the landowner between \$500 and \$700 to file, Haderlein said.

“We feel like we are the stewards of [Fleming Road]; we would like to keep places like this for the future,” Moltmann said.