

Park may be designated a land reserve, but not soon

By KEVIN BRACISZESKI

Daily News Staff Writer

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It hasn't happened as fast as promoters wished, but Ludington State Park may still be named Michigan's first State Land Reserve.

Several Ludington-area agencies formed a coalition about one year ago to seek the designation for the park. Members said they want State Land Reserve status for the park because they don't want the state to sell oil and gas leases there.

The Michigan Natural Resources Commission learned about the local movement during its June meeting in Ludington when coalition members spoke to the commission about the issue. The group then formally applied for State Land Reserve status in February.

The issue will now resurface May 11 when the NRC is scheduled to discuss a review process that is being proposed for the local request and any other future requests for State Land Reserve status.

"The commission will first concentrate on a process for reviewing this, and then will consider Ludington State Park," said Lynne Boyd, manager of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' minerals lease management section. "The first thing is to have a good process for any petition that comes in."

The State Land Reserve Act was introduced by former State Representative Bill Bobier about two years ago. It allows citizens to nominate unique, state-owned lands for designation as reserves. The local group's nomination of Ludington State Park is the first request for State Land Reserve status, but the Jordan River Valley and the Pigeon River area are other sites that could be considered in the future.

Ludington State Park is a 5,000-acre blend of sand dunes, forests and wetlands that is sandwiched between Lake Michigan and Hamlin Lake. In 1997 the DNR was prepared to sell leases for oil and gas under the park. Public outcry about the proposal caused the DNR to drop the leases from that sale, but department officials have said there was no guarantee that the leases wouldn't be offered during future sales.

Several local agencies don't want those leases to ever be sold, so they banded together in spring 1999 to seek the State Land Reserve designation for the park. That coalition includes the Hamlin Township, Hamlin Lake Association, Hamlin Lake Preservation Society and Hamlin Lake Improvement boards. The group then hired the Michigan Land Use Institute to help with the nominating process.

Boyd said that according to the statute the NRC will review requests for State Land Reserve designation, but that the state does not give any guidance or direction for the review. The process that the NRC will hear during its May 11 meeting in Cheboygan was proposed to establish the specific conditions that lands must meet, and sets the procedure for review.

The minimum requirements to qualify for classification as a State Land Reserve are that the property must include at least 640 contiguous acres of state-owned land and contain at least one or more of the

following features: critical dunes, high risk areas, wetlands, endangered species protection areas, a wilderness or natural area. a natural river or other features of environmental sensitivity.

The NRC Policy Committee on Land Management would also analyze the property to determine if there is a need to establish a buffer zone to eliminate the potential of oil and gas being drained by nearby wells.

The proposed review process would:

- send all petitions to the DNR's Land and Minerals Services Division to determine if the minimum criteria are met and the required information is included.
- move to the DNR's land managing division if those conditions are met, and the land managing division will review whether the petition information is accurate, review the area management plan, review the need for a buffer zone, review the proposed boundary and provide a written recommendation to the DNR director.
- be reviewed by the NRC Policy Committee on Land Management and provide its recommendations to the NRC.
- seek public comments, review the DNR recommendations, make a decision and issue a written recommendation to the state Legislature.

Boyd said DNR Director K.L. Cool is scheduled to present the proposal to the NRC at 8:30 a.m. May 11, and the commission could seek public comments on the issue during its June meeting.

She said the earliest date that the NRC may vote on the Ludington State Park request is July 13 when the commission meets in Thompsonville.