

Avon Hills Initiative

Autumn Update 2008

October 2008

MARK YOUR CALENDARS—January 24, 2009

A Celebration of Life in the Avon Hills

By the middle of January, holiday fever will be wearing off and residents of the Avon Hills will begin longing for the resurgence of spring to help shake off the chill of the coldest month of the year. The Avon Hills Initiative board and volunteers have been planning an event to help people do just that. The 2009 AHI conference and annual meeting, **“Living in the Avon Hills,”** is designed for Avon Hills residents and friends to feed the mind, awaken the senses, and enliven the spirit this winter.

On Saturday, January 24, 2009, start your day with a keynote address by award-winning author, naturalist and wildlife photographer, Stan Tekiela. Stan has been a professional naturalist for over 20 years and has written and photographed more than 100 state-by-state field guides and other books on nature. You may recognize many of his titles, including *Fascinating Loons*, *Birds of Minnesota*, *Trees of Minnesota*, and many other popular field guides. For those who haven't had a chance to hear Stan speak, this is an opportunity to meet a Minnesota-grown naturalist

whose passion for sharing in the natural world is nearly uncontainable.

Following the keynote address, the day will be filled with a variety of presentations on topics that directly relate to the passions and interests of the residents of the Avon Hills. In continuing with AHI tradition, there will be presentations on various topics of natural history, water, and land-use and management. New to the AHI conference this year is a celebration of the arts in the Avon Hills as well as several family-friendly presentations designed for kids ages 5-15. Whether your interest is pottery or fiber arts, frogs or monarchs, water quality or property tax programs, this conference is designed for the whole family. In between sessions, you can stretch your legs and your minds as you visit the “Living in the Avon Hills” art show or wander among the booths in the exhibit hall.

The Avon Hills Initiative Annual Meeting will round out the end of the day. Participate in elections for the new AHI Executive

Committee Chair and listen to a short presentation on the year's accomplishments and goals for the future. The celebration ends with the unveiling of the new Initiative Awards. The annual Initiative Awards are designed to “celebrate and recognize extraordinary people in the Avon Hills.” Nominations are currently being accepted for individuals or organizations that are developing or preserving jobs, preserving open land, or promoting the rural character, beauty and ecological health of the environment and livable communities within the Avon Hills. To nominate a community member for an award, visit the AHI web site: www.csbsju.edu/arboretum/avonhills/InitiativeAward.htm.

The AHI board and volunteers are looking forward to sharing in a day of education and fellowship with members and friends of the Avon Hills. Registration for the day is \$15 per adult and \$5 per child ages 5-15 (lunch included). Watch your mailbox in early January for your registration information.

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Changes to Green Acres Law Affect Landowners in the Avon Hills

Will Huston, AHI Board

The Minnesota Agricultural Property Tax Law (commonly known as Green Acres) was revised by the 2008 Tax Bill this past May. Agricultural land enrolled in Green Acres receives a deferment from higher valuations and subsequent taxes that would otherwise increase to reflect market prices. The 2008 Tax Bill revised the requirements and rules of Green Acres making a distinction between productive land (i.e. land that is tilled, grazed, or mowed for hay) and non-productive land (i.e. heavily wooded areas, sloughs, wetlands, or land not suitable for tillage or pasture). The revisions to Green Acres were added to the Tax Bill at the last minute without hearings on the revisions. The revisions do not affect productive land that stays

productive. However, owners of non-productive land enrolled in Green Acres will experience substantial changes.

Under the original Green Acres law, productive land could be enrolled in conservation programs such as CRP, RIM or CREP. Under the new rules, conservation land remains eligible for Green Acres only if it was classified as agricultural property prior to enrollment in the conservation program and was enrolled in both the conservation program and Green Acres before May 2008.

The distinction between productive/non-productive land and limits on conservation enrollments could result in a drastic reduction in the amount of habitat around the

state. For those with land enrolled in Green Acres, a letter from the Stearns County Assessor's Office has been mailed to you explaining the exact changes and ramifications.

Representatives from around the state have heard the outcry from property owners enrolled in Green Acres and residents concerned about the lack of conservation provisions in the revised Green Acres. Contact your local representatives and let them know the Green Acres revisions are not in the best interest of Minnesotans.

Contact the Stearns County Assessor's office at 320.656.3680 or gary.grossinger@co.stearns.mn.us with any questions about Green Acres or Class 2c Managed Forest Land.

Class 2c Managed Forest Land Can Receive 35% Tax Reduction

Stearns Co. Assessors Office

Minnesota has a new property tax classification, Class 2c Managed Forest Land (MFL), which can reduce the burden of property taxes on some actively managed woodland. This classification requires

AHI thanks Rep. Larry Hosch, House author and leader in passage of this legislation. Undeveloped lands demand very few services from the public and provide great value in watershed protection, habitat, renewable resources, recreation, and green space. This law reduces the tax pressure to develop them.

land to have a current forest management plan that has been registered with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Land qualifying for this property tax classification receives a reduced class rate of 0.65 percent until its use changes or it no longer qualifies. Land can be removed from the classification at any time without penalties or sanctions.

Managed forest land is defined as unplatted real estate that is rural in character, is not used for agricultural purposes, and is not improved with a structure (sheds of 300 square feet or less are ex-

empt). Class 2c land cannot be enrolled in the Sustainable Forest Incentive Act Program, Conservation Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Easement Program, Reinvest in Minnesota, or the Green Acres program. Additionally, the land area has to be at least 20 acres in size and the total enrolled acreage cannot exceed 1,920 acres statewide.

If interested in this new property tax classification, contact this area's DNR forester at 320-255-4279, x230 for information about a forest management plan. The deadline to apply for Class 2c MFL is May 1 each year.

*Avon Hills Initiative
Executive Board and Staff!*

Peter Dwyer
Committee Chair
Avon, MN

**Allan Davisson
& Steve Plantenberg**
Government Relations Comm.
Cold Spring, MN and Avon, MN

Mike Leedah
Fundraising Committee
Avon, MN

Lowell Rushmeyer
Land Stewardship/Biological
Sciences Committee
Albany, MN

Karen Bobeldyk
Administration Committee
St. Joseph, MN

Jackie Leedah
Cultural History/
Sense of Place Committee
Avon, MN

Will Huston
Non-Governmental Relations
Committee
Avon, MN & St. Joseph, MN

Mark Conway
Education & PR Committee
Avon, MN

Non-voting staff assistance
provided by: John Maile, *The
Nature Conservancy*; Jenny Kutter
and Tom Kroll, *Saint John's
Arboretum*; and Bill Fahrney and
James DeGiovanni, Land
Heritage Coordinators, *Avon Hills
Initiative*

Conservation Update

Conservation easements allow landowners to retain their property and all their inherent landowner rights except for those rights which they explicitly grant to a third party such as the MN Land Trust (MLT). For example, a landowner interested in long-term conservation might donate the development rights and the mining rights to MLT. The landowner still owns their land and all their options, except for development and mining. MLT holds the development and mining rights, but not the land to which they apply.

Saint John's Arboretum received a grant from LCCMR for establishing conservation easements with MLT in the Avon Hills. The grant will cover expenses to create about 10 easements in the next 3 years. If interested, contact Tom Kroll at 320-363-3126.

On your ballot: the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment

Minnesota Legislators passed a bill to ask voters whether to amend the state constitution to provide dedicated funding for clean water, wildlife, cultural heritage, and natural areas. On November 4, your ballot will read:

"Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to dedicate funding to protect our drinking water sources; to protect, enhance, and restore our wetlands, prairies, forests, and fish, game, and wildlife habitat; to preserve our arts and cultural heritage; to support our parks and trails; and to protect, enhance, and restore our lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater by increasing the sales and use tax rate beginning July 1, 2009, by three-eighths of one percent on taxable sales until the year 2034?"

If passed, the proposed constitutional amendment would dedicate about \$300 million annually for preservation of the environment and the arts. The amendment specifically allocates funding as follows: 33% for water quality, 33% for wildlife habitat, 19.75% for arts and cultural resources, and 14.25% for parks and trails. The cost to an average Minnesota household would be about \$56 annually, or just over \$1 per week.

Minnesota's natural and cultural resources are both critical to maintaining our state's high quality of life, and they are also both among the first areas to be

cut in times of budget crisis. However, amending the constitution is a step that should be taken with deliberation and care.

Voters who leave this question blank will have their votes automatically counted as "no" so the Avon Hills Initiative encourages you to be an informed and engaged voter this election season. For more information, visit www.dnr.state.mn.us/news/features/amendment.html

For opinions on the pros and cons of the amendment visit www.yesformn.org or nosalestaxincrease.org

A Year in the Avon Hills

Peter Dwyer, AHI Chair

*The Avon Hills
Executive Board meets the
last Wednesday of each
month at 4:45 p.m.*

*For questions or directions
contact Bill Fabrney at
320-333-5183,
avonhills@gmail.com
or write to:
Avon Hills Initiative
PO Box 377
Avon, MN 56310*

Avon Hills Initiative staff and volunteers have acted on behalf of the community in a variety of projects this year.

...The Stearns Co. Board of Commissioners brought two years of planning to a successful conclusion in approving the new County Comprehensive Plan. Most important for the residents of the Hills, the Comprehensive Plan explicitly recognizes the Avon Hills as a Natural Resource Area. Allan Davisson and Steve Plantenberg, members of the AHI Executive Committee, represented the Avon Hills through

dozens of planning meetings and public hearings during the planning process.

...A \$377,000 grant from the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR) is now in place to fund conservation easements in the Avon Hills. The grant will also underwrite communications and training conferences aimed at land stewardship and land-use planning in the towns and townships within the Avon Hills.

...AHI has also been active in the local route planning for the CapX2020 high-power transmission lines and county planning for

an upgrade to County Road 51 between Highway 2 and County Road 50. Power line routing options will be submitted to the state Public Utilities Commission sometime this fall. The upgrade to CR 51 is planned to begin in 2009 with 8-foot wide paved shoulders included for the safety of pedestrians and cyclists.

These and other projects are the result of many people working together in the best interest of our communities. By facilitating conversations among all neighbors and residents the Avon Hills Initiative works to make our voices heard.

Avon, MN 56310
PO Box 377

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