

Tight times or not, area school districts are standing behind forests

By Autumn Grooms / La Crosse Tribune

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In this classroom, the walls are trees. Sunlight replaces fluorescent bulbs. Students learn about the environment while surrounded by its sights, sounds, smells and textures.

The West Salem Outdoor Education Center, which covers 130 wooded acres near Fort McCoy in Monroe County, is among the nearly 1,000 acres of forest that belong to school districts in the six-county area.

In theory, districts could make a fair sum of money by selling off such prime woodlands. But educators contend the real value of these school forests is as a teaching tool.

And even cash-strapped districts say they'll never sell.

"I think people are starting to realize how important the school forest is to their school district," said Barb Thompson, environmental education coordinator for the West Salem School District. "Without them, environmental education wouldn't be the same."

It's been suggested several times that the West Salem district sell its forest. Each time, the school board resisted, Thompson said.

"The forest is such an asset," she said.

None of Wisconsin's 25,000 acres of registered school forest land has fallen under the budget axe in five years, said Jeremy Solin, school forest education specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.

Budget-crunched districts occasionally discuss letting go of school forest land, but actual sales are rare, Solin said.

"A sale is a short-term income generator," he said. "If a school board is interested in selling, we work hard to show them the educational benefits."

In fact, some programs are adding on.

The educational value

The average registered school forest parcel in the Coulee Region is 52.75 acres, but many districts have multiple sites.

Single-parcel sizes in La Crosse, Monroe, Crawford, Jackson, Trempealeau and Vernon counties range from the 3-acre Blair-Taylor School Forest in Jackson County to the 138-acre Osseo School Forest in Trempealeau County.

The West Salem district's forest east of Sparta is the largest owned by a La Crosse County district. It was acquired in the late 1950s through a land giveaway at Fort McCoy.

The property's quit-claim deed required 20 years of continuous improvements, so the district added shelters, bathrooms, telephone service and electricity. Work continues on the land this year as the West Salem High School construction class remodels one of the existing shelters.

West Salem students in kindergarten through 10th grade annually visit the school forest. Several said they look forward to the trip into the outdoors.

"We've been coming since kindergarten and there have been tons of experiences that are

awesome," said eighth-grader Bryar Hansen.

An overnight stay in seventh grade, countless nature hikes and "just being outdoors" are among the highlights, he said.

"School forests are doing what works and teaching what matters," Solin said. "Utilizing them excites kids and gets them ready to learn, (they) connect students to the environment."

All subject areas are taught in these outdoor classrooms, Solin said, from science and math to reading and writing.

These programs have two primary goals: enhancing education through hands-on learning and developing environmental literacy, he said.

While Solin couldn't recall a school district that has eliminated its forest program in recent years, he could name several districts working to enhance what they do with the land.

The Tomah School District is erecting a 960-square-foot building at its 20-acre school forest on Glendale Avenue, near the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Tomah.

Intended for outdoor and environmental education, the building will be paid entirely through grants and logging revenues from the district's four forests. Those revenues total \$57,445, including \$32,000 from a harvest last winter.

The building will have electricity and plumbing and could be open for community use, such as hunter safety courses, snowmobile/ATV safety classes, scouting and Boys & Girls Club activities, taxidermy classes and VA patient outreach.

Construction, which will be done by Tomah High School's building trades class, starts next week and is expected to be finished in June 2008.

The Black River Falls Outdoor Education Center, on Hwy. 12 a few miles southeast of Black River Falls, has seen a rise in the number of student visitors this year after the district revamped its program with about \$19,000 in grants from the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board.

Gretchen Marshall, a high school teacher and school forest advisory committee chairwoman, said the money allowed staff to develop curriculum, purchase supplies and cover transportation costs to the forest for this school year.

"Without that money, we wouldn't have been able to get supplies, much less get them to the forest," she said.

The 40-acre school forest was harvested two years ago, but that only generated about \$1,500. "It's not a reliable source of income," Marshall said.

In the Gale-Ettrick-Trempealeau School District, grant money paid for an outdoor classroom building and trail restoration at its 80 acres in Ettrick. High school biology classes are trying to restore some of the native grasslands at the Trempealeau County site, said Terry Collins, director of support services.

The monetary value

Most area school forests are managed by county and state foresters, with a focus on "sustainable natural resource management" that also returns some money to the schools.

"I have worked with many of the districts to ensure that any funds generated on site go back into the school forest program," Solin said, noting a school forest's income depends on the amount of land. "It's not a very large amount, but to a school forest program, it can be a large amount that could provide transportation."

At the West Salem Outdoor Education Center, orange spray paint marked the tall white pines that will be removed as part of the 10-year thinning.

The last timber harvest yielded \$2,300, and Thompson is optimistic the district will net the same or more this time.

"It's the only income generated by the forest," Thompson said. "The money offsets some costs."

But \$2,300 every 10 years isn't much, and transportation costs are on the rise, she added.

The West Salem district has budgeted some money to bring 1,300 kids in the forest annually and provide maintenance, Thompson said. Grant money helps as well, but to defray additional costs, the district is looking to open the school forest to outside groups.

"The forest is such an asset," Thompson said. "I think others would enjoy it, too."

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DID YOU KNOW?

Wisconsin's school forests date back to 1927, when the school and community forest law was enacted, allowing districts to purchase land for forestry and educational purposes. The immediate goal was to get students involved in replanting the state's forests after the "great cut over" and attempts to farm the entire state. Long-term, it was thought these forests could generate income.

Coulee Region Public School Forests

School districts in five counties in the region — La Crosse, Monroe, Crawford, Jackson, Trempealeau and Vernon — collectively hold about 1,000 acres of forest.

Crawford County

North Crawford School District: Gays Mills High School Forest, 10 acres; O.A. Sherwood Memorial Forest, 13 acres.

Prairie du Chien Area School District: Prairie du Chien School Forest, 26 acres.

La Crosse County

Onalaska School District: 27.5 acres of "wooded ridge top land" in Greens Coulee.

Jackson County

Black River Falls School District: Outdoor Education Center, 40 acres on Hwy. 12.

Blair-Taylor School District: Taylor School Forest, 3 acres.

Melrose-Mindoro School District: 94 acres, partially occupied by the school on Hwy. 108.

Tomah Area School District: Tomah High Forest, 78 acres in Mather.

Whitehall School District: Whitehall Memorial High School Forest, 77 acres on Hwy. 21 between Pigeon Falls and Northfield.

Monroe County

Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton School District: Brookwood School Forest, 40 acres.

Sparta School District: Sparta High School Forest, 80 acres.

Tomah Area School District: Lemonweir School Forest, 36 acres;

La Grange School Forest, 5.8 acres near La Grange Elementary School.

West Salem School District: Outdoor Education Center, 132 acres east of Sparta, Wis.

Melrose-Mindoro School District: John Buzzell School Forest, 80 acres between Hwy. 27 and 71.

Trempealeau County

Gale-Etrick-Trempealeau School District: Trempealeau School Forest, 20 acres near Trempealeau, Wis.; G-E-T School Forest Gale Unit, 80 acres in Etrick, Wis.

Osseo-Fairchild School District: Osseo School Forest, 138 acres.

Eleva-Strum School District: Eleva-Strum School Forest, 30 acres south of the high school.

Vernon County

De Soto Area School District: De Soto High School Forest, 40 acres.

Kickapoo Area School District: Viola School Forest, 15 acres.

Sources: Area school districts and Jeremy Solin, Wisconsin school forest education specialist