

'Dangerous' conditions at preserve

By Gerry Smith | Tribune Reporter
May 20, 2009



Evidence of illegal dumping can be found scattered along the Des Plaines River at the Miller Meadow Forest Preserve. (Tribune photo by Phil Velasquez / May 12, 2009)

In the early 1990s, Mary Dye began walking her dog in a large, grassy meadow at the Miller Meadow Forest Preserve in Maywood.

Back then, piles of limestone sat in a fenced-off area, the result of the ongoing Deep Tunnel project. As she strolled through fields of wildflowers, Dye said she waited for the day when Miller Meadow would be restored to its original state.

Today, Dye said she is still waiting, and now environmental groups have joined her in raising concerns about the restoration of Miller Meadow, contending that the site poses hazards to visitors and the environment.

Specifically, they are concerned about numerous shards of broken concrete, glass, brick and metal pipes that are scattered across the site -- and the erosion that is carrying debris and gray sludge, used to promote vegetation, toward the nearby Des Plaines River.

"The bottom line is that the people of Cook County have lost nearly 80 acres of forest preserve land to a landfill," said Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves, which has worked with the [Chicago](#) Environmental Law Clinic to obtain documents on the restoration of Miller Meadow through the Freedom of Information Act.

Steve Mayberry, a spokesman for the Forest Preserve District, said the agency hired "a reputable independent contractor to provide backfill and topsoil to the site."

The source of the debris "has not been formally determined," but he said "we do not believe the items or debris noted are pervasive, prevalent or representative of the area."

Mayberry said the agency has received a "favorable report" from an independent soil testing company that took samples throughout the site.

And after visiting Miller Meadow last fall to look into allegations of open dumping, an Illinois [Environmental Protection Agency](#) inspector determined that there were no violations, said state EPA spokeswoman Maggie Carson.

But Cox said the debris on the site is widespread and "physically dangerous" for people who want to use the area for recreation.

"Purely from a public-use point of view, it makes the site unusable," Cox said.

And Dye said she worries about the threat to wildlife at Miller Meadow after seeing how erosion on the restoration site has carried debris and biosolids toward the river banks.

"I'm not an expert, but if you dump a bunch of construction debris and soil near a river and it starts to erode into the river, I think that's a problem," Dye said.

Located just west of the Des Plaines River, Miller Meadow is home to deer, raccoon, coyote and beavers, which have chewed rings out of the lower trunks of trees and built a lodge of sticks along the muddy river bank, Cox said.

Besides being a home for wildlife, Miller Meadow has served several other purposes. In the early 1920s, it was called Checkerboard Field and was Chicago's official airmail field until a fire in 1921 destroyed most of the buildings.

In the 1950s, the [University of Illinois](#) tried to turn Miller Meadow into a campus, but the proposal was rejected by the Board of Forest Preserve Commissioners.

In a 1956 letter to the commissioners, E.E. Brown, chairman of the board's advisory committee, said Miller Meadow was acquired "by and for all the millions of Cook County citizens."

"It is there not only purely as a picnic space and a breathing space but also a great area to

be ever free of intensive development," Brown wrote. "It is genuinely essential to relief from the pressures and tensions of city and metropolitan living."

In the late 1980s, the [Cook County Forest Preserve](#) District issued licenses to the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago to use Miller Meadow as part of its Deep Tunnel project to alleviate flooding and pollution problems. The Water Reclamation District agreed to pay the cost of restoring the meadow after the project was completed.

The deadline to restore Miller Meadow was originally 1998, but has been extended several times, according to documents. Mayberry said the project has been delayed because the limestone was not removed from the site until 2002-03 and the Forest Preserve District did not receive its first payment from the Water Reclamation District until 2005.

In 2003, the Forest Preserve District hired Earthwerks to restore Miller Meadow, allowing the [Carol Stream](#) company to import its own fill free of charge, documents indicate.

Dan Davies, a principal of Earthwerks, said that only dirt, or "clean fill" in industry terms, was dumped at the site. "There's no landfill debris, no construction debris," he said.

Davies said Miller Meadow is in better shape now than when his company first arrived to restore what he called "a barren wasteland."

"It was an absolutely blighted site, nothing could grow there," Davies said. "We brought in dirt and top soil and vegetated it."

Substantial rain during the past year has hindered the growth of the vegetation, Mayberry said. He said the district is working with Earthwerks to prevent further erosion.

Between 2005 and 2008, the Forest Preserve District received \$1.5 million from the Water Reclamation District to restore Miller Meadow, Mayberry said. Some of the funds have been used for planning and development projects benefiting the Forest Preserve District's holdings, he said. There have never been limitations or restrictions on the use of the payments from the Water Reclamation District, Mayberry said.

Today, it remains unclear when the restoration site will reopen, although Mayberry said "it has not been, is not and will likely not ever be a permitted picnic area." The restoration at Miller Meadow is nearly complete, he said.

Still, Dye said she is furious about how much material was used to restore the site, leaving large mounds where her beloved meadow once stood.

"This is supposed to be protected land for the citizens of Cook County, and it's been

violated by the people who were supposed to protect it," she said.

gsmith@tribune.com