

## Bid for county land splits officials

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The determined effort to bring economic development to Cook County's struggling south suburbs has run head-on into a determined effort to protect acres of undeveloped land.

International Steel Group, also known as ISG, wants to expand its Riverdale steel operation but needs 21 acres of Cook County Forest Preserve District land to make that happen.

It's willing to swap 31 acres it owns in exchange for the land in Whistler Woods to double plant capacity and bring new jobs to an area in desperate need of them.

But environmental groups and some forest preserve commissioners say such a deal would smack of hypocrisy, given the protection those politicians have sworn to bring to open spaces.

Voted for tougher policy

"Since 1915, the forest preserves have been the forest preserves and aren't supposed to be anything else from here until forever," said Benjamin Cox, executive director of Friends of the Forest Preserves.

Just five months ago, commissioners voted unanimously for a new, tougher land-use policy, strengthening their commitment to protect the 68,000 acres under their control.

Conflicting obligations

Yet the same 17 commissioners swearing to protect those preserves also wear the hats of Cook County commissioners -- meaning they also promote economic development in Cook County.

That collision of ideas is why groups such as the Civic Federation have been calling for the two governments to have separately elected bodies.

Commissioner Deborah Sims, who represents the Riverdale area, says this is a no-brainer.

"Since when did the forest preserves become just the forest preserves to a certain group of people?" she asked, pointing to environmentalists. "Sure, I want to see us acquire more acreage for our forest preserves, but I also have a responsibility to be sure the south suburban area does not continue to deteriorate and to bring as much economic growth as I can."

Even among south suburban commissioners, there's a split. ISG officials confirmed their interest in a land swap, but deferred comment to supportive politicians, who say the land ISG wants isn't easily accessible anyway, while the land it's offering can more easily be used by the public.

#### Change of attitude

Months ago, district officials were adamant a swap was unlikely, given the district's mission and a land-use policy requiring 12 votes and a series of public hearings to give up land.

But last week, there was hedging, with a call to hear offers "on a case-by-case basis."

"Our land is extremely valuable -- we can probably make a lot of money selling it off," a frustrated Commissioner Mike Quigley said.

"But how much are we willing to trade off? The next guy who wants to build a Starbucks in Schaumburg -- do we sell to him because he'll be creating jobs in a big mall?"