

## SAVE THE CHICAGO RIDGE PRAIRIE

### Position Highlights HERITAGE LANDS, INC.

#### Who is Heritage Lands, Inc.?

Heritage Lands, Inc., is a non-profit community education organization, incorporated March 11, 1976, specifically organized to assist in the saving of the Chicago Ridge Prairie. Heritage Lands, Inc., is an outgrowth of the initiative started by the Chicago Ridge Village Bicentennial Commission as an official Bicentennial Project. People in Chicago Ridge, the surrounding area, and Worth Township contribute to the leadership position of Heritage Lands in promoting the Chicago Ridge Prairie issue. Heritage Lands is supported entirely by donations, volunteer, from concerned people and firms.

#### What is the Chicago Ridge Prairie?

The Chicago Ridge Prairie represents one of the finest examples of wet mesic/mesic tall-grass prairie left in a high-quality condition in Illinois. Illinois prairies are native plant communities, existing before settlement in 1832, composed primarily of long-lived (perennials) tall grasses and beautiful wildflowers (forbs). The Chicago Ridge Prairie remains an historical remnant of the original Illinois prairies, used for centuries by American Indians, consisting of approximately 150 rare and uncommon plant species. The Chicago Ridge Prairie is unique in another way, it is one of the very few calcareous (alkaline) gravel outwash soil prairies left in Illinois. This special condition allows rare calciphile plant species to grow in good numbers at Chicago Ridge. No existing protected prairie in the Chicago region has such an unusual combination of features.

Although the primary wildlife animals found in the Chicago Ridge Prairie are insects, the Franklin's ground squirrel and the smooth green snake, indicators of original prairie areas, are also found. Both species have suffered dramatic declines in Illinois over the past decade. Saving the Chicago Ridge Prairie would preserve these species for the people of Worth Township.

#### Why Save the Chicago Ridge Prairie?

When viewed as a total package, the reasons for saving this prairie are compelling. Even if we used each criteria alone, Heritage Lands maintains that the Chicago Ridge Prairie is beneficial for the residents of Worth Township. A summary of the most important reasons follows.

1. Best Prairie Around. Simply, the 12.8 acres of Chicago Ridge Prairie comprise one of the best examples of native Illinois tall-grass prairie that can be found in the state. Of only about 1600 acres of tall-grass quality prairie left in Illinois, the Chicago Ridge Prairie represents almost 1%. No other existing gravel based, lake bottom prairie exists in Illinois, making the Chicago Ridge Prairie unique in that respect.

2. Educational/Scientific Use. The Chicago Ridge Prairie is available to over 25,000 students in Worth Township. In addition, students from other Chicago area colleges and universities are using the prairie. Curricula areas such as outdoor/environmental education, nature study, the life and physical sciences, the creative arts, home economics can use various aspects of the prairie for lessons. In addition, the site represents an important opportunity for professional ecologists and field biologists to study a climax plant community nearly extinct in Illinois. Such scientific study of prairie species may lead to new important economic and medicinal use of plant properties.

3. Historic Preservation. As the rings of an old oak carry the mark of past and pre-history, so does the prairie represent the original vegetation of Illinois and of the Indians and early settlers. After the last glacial period, prairie existed in Illinois for approx. 9,000 years. The Chicago Ridge prairie today has existed for approx. the same number of years. Most of Illinois prairie was destroyed by 1910. Yet this parcel remains as a living museum with constantly changing exhibits from season to season.

4. Flood Control. This prairie serves as a water retention basin for the Stoney Creek (Oak Lawn-Chicago Ridge) area. As part of the prairie is low, the soil absorbs a great deal of water and prevents some flooding of the adjoining areas, thereby saving sewer and drain costs for the taxpayer. The Little Calumet Watershed Steering Committee recommends to be preserved as is.

5. Open Space. Most of the remaining open space in Worth Township is in the form of unusable cemeteries. There are only approx. 130 acres of park lands, owned or leased by the villages and park districts for a township population of 200,000. Most of all such park land is used for active recreation. The professional (NPRA) recommendation for urban open space for Worth Township is about 1 acre per 100 persons. Worth Township is about 1800 acres short of this recommendation. The Chicago Ridge Prairie would contribute to the open space needs of the community, esp. in a dense multi-family neighborhood.

\*Unusable for public leisure activities.

6. Passive Recreation. The Chicago Ridge Prairie represents the only substantive opportunity for open space passive recreation currently available to its residents.

Individual life-long sporting activities such as hiking/walking, nature study, photography, nature crafts, birding, insect collecting, and rock collecting are needed by the residents, who cannot or choose not to participate in active sports such as baseball, football. Such opportunities are not now available to municipal programs. In its west-central location, the prairie would conveniently serve all township residents.

**7. Property Appreciation.** Open natural areas are highly desired by the general public. Property adjoining such natural areas, being more desirable, generally appreciate in value at a faster rate than areas without such open space. Homes adjoining the Cook County Forest Preserves often command a premium price. As the Chicago Ridge Prairie, once protected, is known regionally as an important natural area for Illinois, this section of Worth Township will become desirable and will command higher assessments. Higher assessments produce more taxes for the municipalities and local governments. Within a few years, the extra tax differential deposited in local coffers, will out-weigh any potential loss in taxes from public conversion of the site.

**8. Public Acknowledgement and Pride.** Preserving the prairie for present and future generations will assist the reputation of Worth Township and Village of Chicago Ridge. The preservation of this site would put Worth Township and Chicago Ridge on all the natural area maps in Illinois and the Midwest. Lakeside, Michigan is known for its small but high quality primeval beech-maple forest throughout the Midwest. Similarly, Worth Township would be known for its "primeval prairie," especially as the number of prairies extant in Illinois dwindles to a very few locations. As the township includes almost a dozen local governments, the civic pride generated by this site will be shared by all.

In addition, the following public and private groups have recognized the value of the Chicago Ridge Prairie and have endorsed its preservation:

- Illinois Nature Preserves Commission (INPC) -
  - recommended preservation of the prairie as a state nature preserve
- Illinois Natural Areas Survey (INAS)-
  - rated the prairie as a first class high-quality prairie
- Natural Lands Institute (NLI)
  - noted that preservation of the site is necessary for the protection of the small white lady slipper orchid, a plant on the proposed Federal threatened species list
- Illinois Department of Conservation -
  - this prairie represents the last gravel based lake bottom prairie in Illinois
- South Cook-Will County Soil Conservation Service -
  - save as water retention area
- Open Lands Project (OLP) -

rated the CRP as number one project for open space  
Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission (NIPC) -  
urged preservation of CRP, as it qualifies as regional number  
one priority for open space  
Cal-Sag Watershed Flood management Program (CSwFMP) -  
Recommended protection of site for flood management and  
prairie values.  
The Nature Conservancy (TNC) -  
supports acquisition of site by Worth Township  
Illinois Bicentennial Commission (IBC)  
named as official state/local project  
Moraine Valley Community College Science Staff -  
urged preservation of site  
Board of Education District #218  
Board of Education District #127½  
Chicago Ridge Chamber of Commerce  
Chicago Ridge Library District Board  
Chicago Ridge Park District  
Kiwanis Council of Oak Lawn  
Village of Chicago Ridge  
Worth Township

In addition, numbers of scientists and naturalists have urged the preservation of this site, including Dr. Robert Betz, Northeastern Illinois State University, the number one prairie expert in the State of Illinois.

### Who Should Save the Chicago Ridge Prairie?

The Chicago Ridge Prairie should be saved by the people of Worth Township. Initially, Heritage Lands approached the Village of Chicago Ridge to take the leadership role. Investigation of their position indicated that the Village of Chicago Ridge does not currently have the resources or staff to pursue the site, although they publicly support the acquisition of the Chicago Ridge Prairie.