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Exchange heats up in Pugsley gun range upgrades

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May 22, 2021



A Grand Traverse Sheriff's deputy participates in firearms training at the county-owned Pugsley gun range.

Record-Eagle file photo/Mike Krebs



TRAVERSE CITY — A neighbor of the Grand Traverse County-owned Pugsley gun range played an audiotope during public comment at this week's county board meeting.

The recording, made by Kristen Burgess on the back deck of her Fife Lake Township home, gave commissioners and county officials a small taste of the cacophony of gunfire that is regularly heard as law enforcement officers hone their shooting skills.

Burgess and others from the Pugsley Area Residents Conservancy group spoke out against a grant application by the Grand Traverse County Sheriff's Office for \$300,000 in 2 percent gaming revenue from the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians.

The money would be used to raise existing earthen berms around the range and create additional berms for the development of a handgun range, according to the application. The measures are meant to reduce the sound of gunfire.

Also included in the application is a \$330,000 proposal from Team Elmer's dated August 2019 that states "Pricing based on building the berms north of the existing range area. No work to be done to the existing berms besides tying into the north slope."

The proposal is from a brownfield application from two years ago that was rejected by the Fife Lake Township Board.

An updated quote from Elmer's that would include work on the existing berm was not sought, said Chris Forsyth, deputy administrator.

In addition to the ongoing noise issue, members of PARC were not happy that they had not been notified that the grant application was on the agenda for approval. Burgess learned about it on Tuesday, she said.

"I'm disturbed most by the fact that there were no good faith efforts to reach out to us," Burgess said. "There's been no reaching out, no notifications, and no time to sit down and understand the plan."

The grant application was approved Wednesday on a vote of 5-1, with Commissioner Betsy Coffia voting "no." Commissioner Darryl Nelson was absent.

The range was part of the former Pugsley Correctional Facility that closed in 2016 and was purchased in 2019 by the county for \$1 from the Michigan Land Bank Authority.

PARC formed about two years ago to oppose development of the range into a regional law enforcement training center. When contacted by the Record-Eagle, Burgess said that since PARC formed its members have vacillated between pursuing avenues to get the range shut down or sitting down to work things out. That communication has now broken off, she said.

“They don’t want to work with us and that’s what we have to decide at this point, what are our options and what might those involve,” Burgess said.

County and sheriff’s office officials are also frustrated, saying the brownfield plan would have paid for sound mitigation improvements at the range.

“This board has said we own that range, the sheriff’s office will train at that range,” said County Administrator Nate Alger. “This is the sheriff’s office attempt to mitigate sound at that location. The township has declined to approve the brownfield plan to do that exact thing.”

While raising the existing berms is not included in the 2-year-old quote, Alger said that work is part of the plan.

The range was used by the sheriff’s office years before its purchase by the county, Alger said. But PARC members say since it is now used much more frequently. In addition to the sheriff’s office, the range is used by the Michigan State Police, Northwestern Michigan College officers in training, Traverse City police, tribal police and more.

“Training with firearms is the most important training we do,” said Sheriff Tom Bensley. “We need a good, sound modern facility to do that.”

Gerianne Street, Fife Lake Township supervisor and a founding member of PARC, said the county could use other existing gun ranges to practice shooting, such as one on Supply Road. The tribe’s money would also be better spent on building an indoor range, she said.

“I think it’s just pride and hubris by the sheriff’s department that they have to have their own range,” said Street, who lives on Hodge Road near the range. “I don’t know of any other sheriff’s departments that have their very own range.”

Street said she is also upset by the lack of communication from the county and the sheriff’s department, saying the trust has been broken.

“Transparency is what we want,” she said.

Bensley questioned why the item was taken off the consent calendar at the meeting, saying he would have asked Capt. Chris Clark to attend the meeting as Clark has been working on the proposal from the beginning.

Coffia said she removed the item because the consent calendar is for non-controversial items, which Pugsley is not. The agenda is also misleading, she said.

“You have to dive into multiple layers of a complicated, almost 200-page agenda to figure out that it’s about the Pugsley facility,” Coffia said.

The neighbors are not being kept informed and are being made to “jump through bureaucratic hoops” to get their questions answered, she said.

“We need to do a better job of sitting down with people who have concerns and treat this as if it’s your neighborhood,” Coffia said.

In addition to the berm work, the plan includes building an open air handgun range with a covered structure, though the county will likely have to seek other grants and funding for that, Clark said. Hand guns are used most often by officers and a covered range would be ideal for sound abatement, he said.

The plan uses recommendations made by the Florida-based Sieben Associates from an acoustical study done on the Supply Road range.

There has been no such study done on the Pugsley range, Clark said.

Before the property was purchased the county worked with the Fife Lake Township Board and township planners to update its master plan and get the Pugsley property, which had previously not been zoned, designated as a Planned Development District. Public safety facilities were deemed a special use in the district and a site plan for the county facility was approved by the township.

The township later denied the application to develop the property as a brownfield site.

Terry Street was on the township board when the site plan was approved, something he now says was a mistake.

“This gun range is a real monster,” he said. “I had no idea it was going to be this much of a monster. It’s caused a lot of grief, it’s caused a lot of discomfort and it’s ruined our peace and tranquility.”

Plans also show a tower on the northeast corner of the property that Clark said would be used to train officers to search buildings and for sniper training. There are currently no plans to build the tower, he said, adding that the facility will be developed in phases over the next 20 years.

The tower, which would be located outside the berms, is one of the things that worries Burgess the most.

“I believe that we have good shooters, but mistakes happen and I would hate for one of my kids or animals to be on the other end of their mistake,” Burgess said.

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