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THE REPUBLIC

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LOCAL NEWS

Land trust seeking public comment

Bloomington-based nonprofit conservation organization Sycamore Land Trust, which protects 11,418 acres of land in southern Indiana, is currently applying for reaccreditation with the Land Trust Alliance. The accreditation program recognizes land conservation organizations that meet quality standards for protecting natural places and working lands. The Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance, accepts public input and signed, written comments on pending applications during a public comment period, which is now open. Comments must express how Sycamore Land Trust complies with quality standards which address the ethical operation of the land trust. For more information on the accreditation program and to submit a comment, visit landtrustaccreditation.org. Comments can also be emailed to info@landtrustaccreditation.org until Sept. 29.

YOU SHOULD KNOW HAVE A STORY IDEA?

Do you have a story idea you'd like to see in print? Share it with The Republic newsroom. Call 812-379-5665 or send an email to editorial@therepublic.com. Story ideas also can be submitted online at therepublic.com.

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Check out family milestones such as anniversaries, engagements and weddings each Sunday in The Republic. You can download forms to submit your own family milestones online at therepublic.com.

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OBITUARIES A7

Columbus
Gary Nielander
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Michael Henry

DAILY



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TURNING THE TIDE?



At 50, Country Squire Lakes looks ahead, haunted by troubled past

By DAVE STAFFORD | THE REPUBLIC
dstafford@therepublic.com

JENNINGS COUNTY — Mike Miller's office walls are covered with unsightly 8-by-11 photos — a collage of trashed, burned-out trailers, junked campers, abandoned hoards and overgrown lots strewn with garbage.

Every picture represents one of hundreds of properties at Country Squire Lakes in Jennings County that has been cleaned up. But Miller only half-jokes that the photos might someday cover the ceiling too. As CSL's court-appointed receiver and manager, he's maybe halfway finished removing the blight from a sprawling 1,400-acre development that began life 50 years ago as a rural retreat marketed to city folks as an affordable weekend getaway. The reality of recent decades has been a spiral into a notoriously dangerous haven for drugs and crime.

Yet things are happening at Country Squire Lakes now that haven't occurred in years. In some places, builders are constructing brand new residential, stick-built homes. On a recent summer weekday, dozens of children on summer break, many from outside the development, played basketball on a freshly paved court and joined in activities inside the recently established Boys & Girls Club at the just-renovated clubhouse. There are plans to build a new public safety building next door, and Jennings County Sheriff's deputies now are assigned to the property.

There is literal community buy-in, and a flickering sense of optimism in a place of 3,500 people where the Country Squire Lakes name has long



been synonymous with its troubles.

Buying in

Miller, a lifelong Jennings County resident and a retired business owner, doesn't sugar-coat Country Squire Lakes. "They certainly owned the perception they had," he said, "... but I've got a passion about this." He's trying make the development stand for something else — clean, safe living.

"We've definitely turned the tide," he said. "The water's not coming in anymore; it's coming out."

Jennings County government has stepped in at Country Squire Lakes in a major way. For instance, the county last year took ownership of all 34 miles of formerly private roads within the development in an arrangement that compensated the development's Community Association with \$1 million.

Miller said the deal made sense for both parties. In owning the roads, the county will receive more annual road funding under the state formula while Country Squire Lakes will be relieved of an impossible financial burden. The development's revenue comes

from dues of \$325 a year assessed on each lot, plus income from the sale of lots.

"Basically the only thing I see is benefits" to using public money to help CSL, said County Commissioner Matt Sporleder, who along with County Council member Mike Gerth sits on the CSL advisory board that reports to Miller.

"It was basically run down and turned into something that wasn't really good for the community. ... Now, we have property values increasing," Sporleder said. He and others note there was a time you couldn't give away property at Country Squire Lakes.

"At one point, the county had over 1,000 properties" due to unpaid property taxes. Working with Miller, "We have an agreement where we are trying to offer those properties up to adjacent, responsible property owners." The rest Miller is selling. Cheap.

Yet Sporleder makes a bold prediction on the money the county invests at CSL and the return that could come from rising land values and a growing tax base. "Ultimately," he

(SEE LAKES PAGE A3)

Pictured from top: Country Squire Lakes property manager and receiver Mike Miller talks about the work he has overseen to clean of the blighted community outside of North Vernon, Ind., Thursday, July 27, 2023. The pictures on the walls are of hundreds of blighted homes and mobile homes that have been cleared from lots since he took receivership of the community roughly seven years ago. // A view of the sign for the clubhouse and administration offices at Country Squire Lakes outside of North Vernon, Ind., Thursday. MIKE WOLANIN | THE REPUBLIC

Coroner's office has official vehicle

By MARK WEBBER | THE REPUBLIC
mwebber@therepublic.com

The Bartholomew County Coroner's office now has its own vehicle, something that had been requested from the county for some time. After the Bartholomew County Council approved the appropriation of \$53,000 for a new Dodge van, Coroner Clayton Nolting said he was able to buy the vehicle from the Columbus Automotive Group.



"Basically, it's the same type of vehicle you see Amazon or FedEx drivers use all the time," Nolting said.

An additional amount of money has been set aside to retrofit the van to store numerous items that may be needed in a death investigation, Nolting said.

It might be easy to assume that the coroner's office would be near the top of the list to receive an official county-owned vehicle. But that wasn't the case while Nolting spent 10 years serving as a deputy coroner.

While Allen K. Smith II was elected coroner in 2008, voters made the late Larry Fisher coroner again in 2012. He

(SEE VEHICLE PAGE A8)

STUDENT FILM FESTIVAL 'Blue' to be screened in Bloomington

By JANA WIERSEMA | THE REPUBLIC
jwiersema@therepublic.com

A short film written by a local graduate will be shown at an upcoming festival celebrating students' work.

"Blue," written by Piper Parks, will publicly debut at Constellation Stage and Screen's first ever Student Film Festival, which is set for Aug. 12 at the Waldron Arts Center Auditorium in Bloomington. Doors open at 1:30 p.m., and the festival will kick off at 2 p.m. with a screening of "Blue."

Tickets are \$5 and can be purchased at seconstellation.org. The event will also feature other films made by young people and adults who are students.

A trailer for "Blue" can be viewed on Constellation's Facebook page.

"Blue tells the story of Oliver, who after months of loneliness and isolation, has lost her spark, her sense of color and feeling. In the dullness of her depression, she's lost touch with the feelings and places that she once felt safe. A familiar young man, Blue, comes to her in a dream and tries his best to make her see

(SEE BLUE PAGE A4)