

FAQ: The Briar East Dune Woodlands Controversy

- 1. What are the Briar East Dune Woodlands and why are they significant?** The Briar East Dune Woodlands are a remnant of the 4,000-year-old High Tolleston Dunes, a significant environmental treasure in Hammond, Indiana. They are one of the last remaining green spaces in the city, providing fresh air, a natural habitat for diverse wildlife including nesting red-tailed hawks and barred owls, and a vital stopover for migrating birds. These woodlands hold historical and ecological importance as they represent a unique geological formation from when Lake Michigan was much higher, and they are a vital natural resource for the community.
- 2. What is the proposed overpass project and why is it controversial?** The City of Hammond, under Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr., plans to build an overpass that would cut directly through the Briar East Dune Woodlands. This project is controversial because it would destroy a significant portion of the woodlands, a move opposed by the community. The city claims the overpass will resolve issues with stopped trains blocking crossings, and provide a safe alternative for pedestrians (including students) who currently climb over trains, but opponents argue the plan is deceptive and has a hidden agenda.
- 3. What are the community's concerns about the overpass project?** The community is concerned about several things. They believe the project is a misdirection that won't resolve the train crossing issue and does not consider student needs. They feel that closing railroad crossings and diverting traffic to the overpass will create heavy congestion. They believe the overpass will not serve walking students as it will add 20-25 minutes to their walk. Moreover, the community fears the overpass is a first step toward developing a new, upscale subdivision in the area, which would further destroy the woodlands and lead to gentrification, pushing out existing residents by raising property values. There is also concern that the city has been opaque with plans and dismissive of community input.
- 4. How has the Mayor responded to community concerns?** Mayor McDermott has been criticized for his dismissive and condescending attitude toward community members who have voiced concerns. At public meetings, he has reportedly interrupted and talked over those raising objections, evading difficult questions and showing a lack of transparency. He has refused to commit to not building new homes in the area in the future, increasing community suspicion of a hidden development agenda.
- 5. What is the argument that the overpass project is an example of "environmental racism?"** The project is described as an example of environmental racism because it prioritizes development and profit over the preservation of a natural space that benefits the working class and minority communities. The plan to build upscale housing near the overpass is believed to be an attempt to raise property values and price out long-term residents of the area. The underlying critique is that under the current capitalist system, natural spaces are devalued until they can be used for development or financial gain, which disproportionately affects marginalized communities.

6. **What evidence suggests a hidden agenda beyond the stated purpose of the overpass?** The city engineer commented that there was room for 50 houses in the area. While the Mayor has denied there are immediate plans for a subdivision, his refusal to commit to never building new homes in the area has fueled suspicion. The community believes the overpass is designed to open up the Briar East Woods for a new development, similar to the neighboring Parrish View subdivision which consists of high-priced homes, and which would lead to increased gentrification.
7. **What actions are community members taking to oppose the overpass project and protect the woodlands?** Community members are actively engaged in opposing the overpass project through several means. They have created a petition to save the Briar East Dune Woodlands that has already garnered over 2,000 signatures. They are organizing community meetings, using social media campaigns to raise awareness, and appealing to the city council to preserve the woods as a park. They are also working to bring attention to the environmental and community impacts of the project and pushing for a more pragmatic solution for the train crossing issue.
8. **What is the larger significance of this situation and what does it say about the value of green spaces in urban areas?** The struggle to save the Briar East Dune Woodlands is reflective of a broader issue regarding the value of green spaces in urban environments. This case illustrates how development plans and short-term financial interests can often take precedence over preserving natural resources and community well-being. It highlights a need for greater transparency and accountability from local governments, as well as the crucial role that grassroots activism and community engagement play in protecting valuable ecosystems from the pressures of development. The narrative emphasizes that these spaces provide critical benefits such as clean air, biodiversity, and community recreation, and their value is often not reflected in the standard capitalist model.

Okay, here is a briefing document summarizing the key themes and information from the provided sources:

Briefing Document: Briar East Dune Woodlands Conservation Efforts

Date: October 26, 2023

Subject: Analysis of the proposed overpass construction in Hammond, Indiana and its impact on the Briar East Dune Woodlands.

Executive Summary:

This document summarizes information regarding a proposed overpass project in Hammond, Indiana, and the associated community efforts to protect the Briar East Dune Woodlands. The project, spearheaded by Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr., has faced significant community opposition due to its potential destruction of a 4,000-year-old forest and the perceived lack of

transparency in the city's planning. This briefing will cover the key issues, arguments, and community actions surrounding this controversy.

Key Themes and Issues:

1. Threat to Ancient Woodlands:

- The Briar East Woods are a remnant of the High Tolleston Dunes, a 4,000-year-old ecosystem. The documents refer to it as, "one of the last surviving remnants of the 4,000-year-old High Tolleston Dunes." (JTNWI document).
- This area is a crucial green space for the community, providing fresh air and a natural environment for families. The JTNWI document highlights that, "these woods are one of the few remaining patches of green space in our city where families can gather to breathe fresh air and be surrounded by nature."
- The proposed overpass would cut directly through these woods, causing significant damage. The petition states that the project entails "leveling the dune woodlands and addresses additional significant issues."

1. Community Opposition and Mayor's Response:

- There's "near-universal opposition by the community members" (JTNWI doc) to the overpass project.
- Mayor McDermott Jr. is criticized for a lack of transparency and for being dismissive of community concerns. The JTNWI document states that at public forums "attendees were met with dismissive condescension."
- Specific examples include the Mayor interrupting and talking over a 17-year-old climate activist who raised questions about transparency, responding to her concerns with, "I've been doing this for 18 years, ma'am. Like, as long as you've been alive, I think." (JTNWI document)
- Community members feel their concerns are being ignored.

1. Justification for the Overpass and its Flaws:

- The city claims the overpass is necessary to solve the issue of stopped trains blocking railroad crossings. The JTNWI document states, "the overpass would solve the train issue in Hessville by creating a route by which cars could get over the tracks when a train is blocking the crossings."
- However, the plan involves closing other crossings which will divert traffic to the overpass and likely cause congestion. The JTNWI document highlights that "as part of the project, the railroad crossings at Arizona Avenue and Parrish Avenue would be closed."
- The overpass is not accessible or beneficial for students who walk to school as it requires a significant detour. The JTNWI document further explains, "Once students get across the tracks using the overpass, they would still have to walk another 20 minutes to get to Morton and 25 minutes to get to Scott."

1. Potential Hidden Agenda: Gentrification and Development:

- There are strong suspicions that the overpass is a precursor to building a new upscale subdivision in the area. The JTNWI document suggests, "If the overpass is completed, a subdivision is likely to soon pave over the rest of Briar East woods."
- The city's engineer, Dean Button, commented there was room for 50 houses.

- Critics argue this project is part of a larger strategy of gentrification, which could displace working-class residents. The JTNWI document states, “The playbook is always the same: attract affluent residents to a neighborhood with upscale development that raises property values which prices black, brown and working-class white people out of their homes.”
 - This is perceived as another example of "environmental racism".
1. **Environmental Significance and Community Advocacy:**
 - The Briar East Dune Woodlands are ecologically important, serving as habitat for various species, including nesting hawks and owls, and supporting thousands of migrating birds.
 - The petition highlights that the woodlands are, "the last unprotected remnant of the High Tolleston Shoreline Dunes" with "thousands of native trees destined to be wiped out and dunes thousands of years old bulldozed."
 - Community members are actively opposing the project through petitions, volunteer efforts and donations to Just Transition Northwest Indiana (JTNWI). The JTNWI document suggests, "There are many ways you can support to help us oppose this overpass."
 - The Save the Briar East Dune Woodlands petition already has over 2,000 signatures.
 1. **Community Engagement and Activism:**
 - Various community efforts to protect the woodlands are being shared across social media platforms.
 - The Invisible Aquifer website shows examples of this outreach, which includes Instagram reels tagged with #SaveBriarEastWoods and #GrandAvenueSolution, along with discussions in the city council meetings regarding the Briar East Dune Woodlands.

Key Quotes:

- "The woods at the center of Hammond’s Hessville neighborhood are one of the last surviving remnants of the 4,000-year-old High Tolleston Dunes that once covered much of the area." - JTNWI Document
- “Mayor Thomas McDermott Jr. defended his administration’s plans to construct the overpass despite near-universal opposition by the community members.” - JTNWI Document
- “I’ve been doing this for 18 years, ma’am. Like, as long as you’ve been alive, I think.” - Mayor McDermott Jr. (JTNWI document)
- "If the overpass is completed, a subdivision is likely to soon pave over the rest of Briar East woods." - JTNWI Document
- "The Dune Woodlands have been authenticated as the last unprotected remnant of the High Tolleston Shoreline Dunes." - Petition Document
- "When you understand that under capitalism a forest has no value until it's cut down, you begin to understand the root of our ecological crises." - JTNWI Document

Conclusion:

The proposed overpass in Hammond represents a significant threat to the Briar East Dune Woodlands, an ecologically important area with historical significance. The community is

actively organizing against the project, citing concerns about environmental damage, a lack of transparency, potential gentrification, and the Mayor's dismissive attitude towards their concerns. This issue highlights the tension between urban development and environmental preservation, and the crucial role of community activism in protecting natural resources.

Next Steps:

- Monitor social media and other community channels for updates.
- Support community activism efforts, including petitions and donations.
- Continue to investigate the city's long-term plans for the area.

Briar East Dune Woodlands Study Guide

Quiz

1. What is the main threat to the Briar East Woods, and what is the justification for this threat, according to Hammond's mayor? The main threat is the construction of an overpass. The mayor claims it will solve the issue of stopped trains blocking crossings and prevent students from climbing over train cars to get to school.
2. According to the article from JTNWI, why do some community members believe the overpass is not the true goal of the city? Community members suspect the overpass is a first step towards building a new subdivision, possibly an extension of the upscale Parrish View subdivision. They believe the city intends to profit by attracting affluent residents to the area.
3. How does the JTNWI article characterize Mayor McDermott Jr.'s interactions with community members regarding the overpass project? The article describes Mayor McDermott Jr. as dismissive and condescending, particularly towards those expressing concerns. He is also portrayed as evasive, not directly answering concerns about future development in the area.
4. According to the Change.org petition, why is the Briar East Dune Woodland considered an important area? The petition highlights the area as the last unprotected remnant of the High Tolleston Shoreline Dunes, with thousands of native trees, old dunes, and habitats for various wildlife, including migrating birds.
5. What specific issues regarding traffic and pedestrians does the JTNWI article raise about the proposed overpass? The article argues that closing other crossings will divert traffic to the overpass, likely causing congestion. It also states that the overpass route is not convenient for students who walk to school, adding considerable time to their commute.
6. What does the JTNWI article mean when it argues the overpass project is an example of environmental racism? The article asserts that the project is an example of environmental racism because it prioritizes development and profits over the health and

well-being of the existing community, impacting mainly working-class and minority populations.

7. What role has social media played in the effort to preserve the Briar East Dune Woodlands, according to the "Invisible Aquifer" source? Social media has been crucial for raising awareness and organizing community support through various channels like Instagram reels, which emphasize the urgency of preserving the woodland, and for sharing community meeting updates and other relevant information.
8. According to the Change.org petition, what do community members want the city to do with the Briar East Dune Woodland? Community members are urging the city to keep the Briar East Dune Woodlands intact and to designate the area as a park, protected in perpetuity for residents. They also are urging the city to develop a more pragmatic solution for the train crossings that does not entail destroying the woodlands.
9. How does the JTNWI article explain the connection between the concept of capitalism and the destruction of natural areas like the Briar East Woods? The article suggests that, under capitalism, natural spaces are seen as having no value until they are converted into commercial uses. This mindset, it claims, is the root of the current ecological crises.
10. Name three ways that people can support efforts to oppose the proposed overpass, according to the JTNWI article. People can support the efforts by signing the petition, volunteering their time, and donating to help support the organizing efforts against the project.

Answer Key

1. The main threat is the construction of an overpass. The mayor claims it will solve the issue of stopped trains blocking crossings and prevent students from climbing over train cars to get to school.
2. Community members suspect the overpass is a first step towards building a new subdivision, possibly an extension of the upscale Parrish View subdivision. They believe the city intends to profit by attracting affluent residents to the area.
3. The article describes Mayor McDermott Jr. as dismissive and condescending, particularly towards those expressing concerns. He is also portrayed as evasive, not directly answering concerns about future development in the area.
4. The petition highlights the area as the last unprotected remnant of the High Tolleston Shoreline Dunes, with thousands of native trees, old dunes, and habitats for various wildlife, including migrating birds.
5. The article argues that closing other crossings will divert traffic to the overpass, likely causing congestion. It also states that the overpass route is not convenient for students who walk to school, adding considerable time to their commute.
6. The article asserts that the project is an example of environmental racism because it prioritizes development and profits over the health and well-being of the existing community, impacting mainly working-class and minority populations.
7. Social media has been crucial for raising awareness and organizing community support through various channels like Instagram reels, which emphasize the urgency of preserving the woodland, and for sharing community meeting updates and other relevant information.

8. Community members are urging the city to keep the Briar East Dune Woodlands intact and to designate the area as a park, protected in perpetuity for residents. They also are urging the city to develop a more pragmatic solution for the train crossings that does not entail destroying the woodlands.
9. The article suggests that, under capitalism, natural spaces are seen as having no value until they are converted into commercial uses. This mindset, it claims, is the root of the current ecological crises.
10. People can support the efforts by signing the petition, volunteering their time, and donating to help support the organizing efforts against the project.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the different arguments presented for and against the construction of the overpass through the Briar East Woods. Consider the various stakeholders involved and their interests, and discuss which arguments are more compelling and why.
2. Discuss the concept of "environmental racism" as it is applied to the proposed overpass project and the potential development of the Briar East Woods. Explain how this framework provides a deeper understanding of the issues at stake.
3. Examine the role of community activism and social media in the fight to preserve the Briar East Woods. Analyze how various forms of media and public engagement have contributed to the movement.
4. Evaluate the conflict between economic development and environmental preservation, using the Briar East Woods situation as a case study. Explore whether sustainable solutions can be found that balance these competing priorities.
5. Consider how the proposed plan aligns with (or doesn't align with) the goals of a just transition. Explore the implications of the current development plans on the community and the environment and the possibility of alternative solutions.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **High Tolleston Dunes:** Ancient sand dunes formed by Lake Michigan thousands of years ago; the Briar East Woods are a remnant of these dunes.
- **Briar East Woods:** The forested area in Hammond, Indiana, that is under threat of development due to the proposed overpass construction.
- **Overpass:** A bridge built to carry a road or railway over another road or railway; in this context, it is proposed to go over train tracks.
- **Just Transition:** A framework for a fair and equitable shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative one that protects both the environment and workers' rights.
- **Gentrification:** The process of wealthier people moving into a historically lower-income urban area, leading to increased property values and displacement of existing residents.
- **Environmental Racism:** The disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on communities of color and low-income areas due to systemic inequalities.
- **Grassroots Organizing:** A movement that uses the community and its members to create change.

- **Regenerative Economy:** An economic system focused on ecological restoration and long-term health of people and the planet.
- **Capitalism:** An economic system where the means of production are privately owned and operated for profit, and market forces dictate the production, distribution, and pricing of goods and services.
- **Special Interests:** Individuals or groups that are seeking to gain benefits from a certain action or public policy.