

New views coming to Winthrop Harbor

Observation deck planned for nature preserve off of lake

BY FRANK ABDERHOLDEN
News-Sun

Bird watchers and other people this summer will have a new experience available at the Spring Bluff Nature Preserve in Winthrop Harbor, where plans call for a two-tiered observation deck, a first for the Lake County Forest Preserve District.

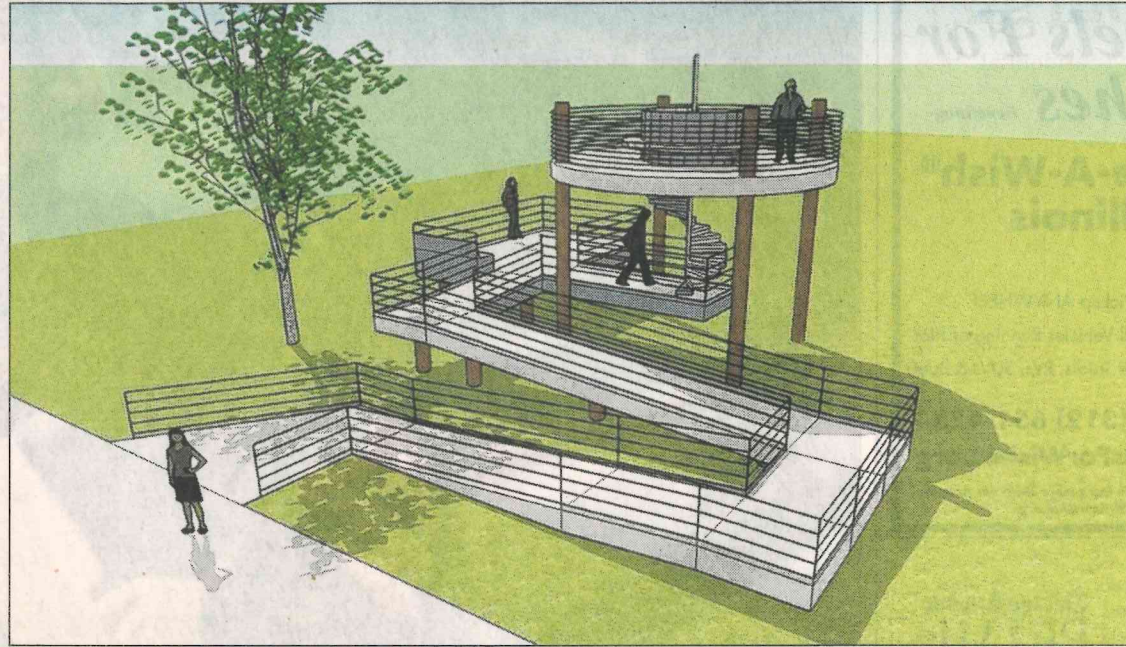
The \$264,000 structure is being built by Integral Construction Inc., of Country Club Hills. Construction is slated to start this spring, with parts of the observation structure being built there and then shipped to northern Lake County, said Randy Seebach, director of planning and land preservation for the forest preserves.

"We've never done anything this extensive," he said, adding that Old School Forest Preserve in Libertyville and Greenbelt Forest Preserve in North Chicago had shelters that included stairs to a lookout point.

The structure's first deck will be just over five feet tall and handicapped-accessible, and its second level will be 15 feet high, with access provided by a spiral staircase. It will be made of long-lasting noncombustible steel, Seebach said.

"You'll be able to see Lake Michigan and a 360-degree view from both platforms," he said.

The district has also taken a deteriorated asphalt fire-access roadway and turned it into a



LAKE COUNTY FOREST PRESERVES

A two-tiered observation deck is planned for the Spring Bluff Nature Preserve in Winthrop Harbor.

crushed path with some new asphalt so fire officials still have another pathway to SkipperBud's just north of North Point Marina. Parking for the trail is the first lot on your right when you get to the marina.

The preserve is an important part of the 6,000-acre lakeshore area known as the Chiwaukee Prairie Illinois Beach Lake Plain, covering 15 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline in southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois.

Eight different public entities own the property, and it was recently designated a Wetland of International Importance.

According to the Illinois Nature

Preserves Commission, the Lake County Forest Preserve District began purchasing property in 1963, and restoration of the site began in 1982. Seebach said it was the district's first purchase of land with lakefront property on Lake Michigan, but most of the shoreline property went on to become the North Point Marina.

It is a complex of beach ridges and dunes formed in the Lake Michigan basin between 3,000 and 4,000 years ago when the lake was about 20 feet above the present stage, according to the Nature Preserves Commission.

The varying topography includes sand prairie, sand savanna, marsh and graminoid fen, which

provides for a wide variety of plant life and, in turn, habitat for many species of migratory and breeding wildlife, according to the commission.

Notable breeding species include Henslow's sparrow, king and Virginia rails, upland sandpiper, least bitterns, American bitterns and common snipe. In addition, these communities support a rich diversity of plant species including royal fern, hoary and fringed puccoon, butterfly-weed, white wild indigo, ragged fringed orchid, prairie lily and button blazingstar, according to the commission.

Seebach said extensive restoration work has been done in the

area, and in 2013, the Chicago Wilderness Alliance honored the Lake County Forest Preserve District for attaining the highest possible level of Excellence in Ecological Restoration accreditation for its work at the Spring Bluff Nature Preserve.

The alliance reported at the time that the 14 community types within this site provide habitat for more than 500 plant and 300 animal species. Among those are 63 state and four federally listed threatened and endangered species and species of concern.

Seebach said the forest preserves district has had such good success with restoration there that sometimes visitors can hardly see past the tall grasses and sedges along the trail, one reason they thought an observation deck would be a good idea.

"We've had such good success up there," he said. "It will give people the opportunity out in the preserve to see some of the restoration, birds and wildlife that is out there and not visible at ground level in the fall. ... It's beautiful there."

In addition, the district recently approved an invasive species removal plan for the preserve with help from a grant issued by the United States Department of Fish and Wildlife. Native Restoration Services Inc., of Lake Bluff, was awarded a contract for \$205,159, and it will provide landowners in the Lake Michigan Lake Plain with a means to control a suite of 18 priority invasive plant species.

fabderholden@tribpub.com
Twitter @abderholden