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Times Writers Group: Rockville, do right in path feud

By Vicki Ikeogu

When the city of Rockville in July approved using \$36,000 from its park dedication fund to repave a walking path by Pleasant Lake, a couple of people requested the repavement of another path near the city's core.

This 464-foot bike path, which connects Cypress Court, a cul-de-sac, to Walnut Circle allows neighbors to walk from Cypress to other housing developments without having to take the less-safe option of Stearns County Road 8. At 12 years old, this path was in desperate need of repair.

Rockville Planning Commission Chairwoman, Toni Honer, whose property borders three quarters of the trail, suggested redoing the path at the same time because the equipment and labor was already available for the other project.

The city agreed to look into the matter, and when City Council members Duane Willenbring and John Koerber — along with park and rec committee President Scott Stenseth — walked the trail they agreed that it needed to be redone.

Meanwhile, City Administrator Rena Weber checked property records and noticed that what was thought to be a city path was never officially platted and the temporary easement that was made was never turned permanent.

Stearns County surveyor Denny Kron agreed that the path was private property of landowners Scott and Toni Honer and Cory and Janelle Gaule. They were paying property taxes as well as carrying liability on the path.

Weber contacted the Honers and the Gaules with this and asked them to attend a public works meeting to voice their concerns. On Sept. 16, the committee met and discussed options for the donation of the path or keeping it as private property.

It seemed clear city officials were trying to pressure the landowners to donate the easement. City Council member Randy Volkmuth had stated that if the property was to be kept private the landowners would be responsible for removing the pavement. Mayor Jeff Hagen stated that if the path were to be donated the city would have enough money to repair and maintain it.

With nothing accomplished, the committee told the Honers and Gaules to arrange a neighborhood meeting for more discussion. The informal Oct. 5 meeting was just as unproductive as the first meeting. The landowners again were pressured to gift the land to the city, as Hagen put it "to get rid of the nuisance."

But as I see it, the city was the one who had placed the nuisance on them and it should be responsible for cleaning up the mess.

Some City Council members believe the best remedy is to have the landowners donate the land and the city maintain it. But is that best for the landowners?

My answer is a big fat no.

The Honers and the Gaules have paid property taxes and been responsible for liability since they have lived there. According to Toni Honer, their lot is about 1.3 acres, including the path. If gifted to the city she would be losing one fifth of an acre.

Why should they and the Gaules have to lose property they were paying for because of the city and the developer's mistake?

Not to mention that if someone would have gotten seriously hurt, who would have been responsible? The bike path is private property, which means that they would have been liable.

The Honers and the Gaules who own about 344 feet and 122 feet, respectively, have done most of the maintenance on the path, along side the Lions Club, not the city maintenance crew, which only plows the snow off it.

All blacktop chunks that were removed and other grooming were done by the Honers and the Gaules, who assumed the city owned it. How can the city say it will maintain the path if it has not done so for the past 12 years?

The city either should pay the Honers and the Gaules for their property or restore it to its natural condition at no charge to the owners.

The city needs to own up to the mistake and correct it themselves. It's the right thing to do.

This is the opinion of Vicki Ikeogu, whose column is published the third Thursday of the month.