

County takes step to preserve North Point lakefront property

By **ROD SMITH**
FOR THE TRIBUNE

PAW PAW — After several months of discussions and negotiations, Van Buren County commissioners have OK'd a decision they hope will protect the North Point Conservation Area in South Haven Township forever.

Commissioners voted 5-2, recently, to approve a conservation easement with the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, a group dedicated to preserving dune land and other undeveloped land areas.

Although there may be some loopholes, commission Chair Christopher Randall said after the vote, "I'm excited by the easement that we've achieved at this point."

Randall was apparently referring to a last-minute discussion prompted by resident Dave Foerster who said he wanted to see the agreement go back into committee. There was language, Foerster claimed, that allowed for a two-story private home that is currently located on the North Point property. Foerster claimed it could open the door in the future for private development.

"There is no restriction on the sale of the property," Foerster said.

Commissioner Mike Toth agreed with Foerster that the matter should go back to committee. "If we're going to do this we should get it right," Toth said, noting

the county had owned the property for 80 years.

But Commissioner Susan Hammond said lawyers had put in the language to allow use of the structure for boy scouts for overnight stays. It could also be used by a park ranger or a volunteer caretaker, should one be needed in the future, Commissioner Tom Erdmann said.

"We're trying to think of 100 years from now or 200 years from now," Erdmann said.

But Toth wanted it to say for caretaker only. "That just opens the door," Toth said.

Julie Pioch, the director of the Van Buren County office of the Michigan State University Extension, said the building should be torn down, which she considered to be dilapidated, so there would be no issue.

After discussion, commissioners voted 5-2 to approve the easement. Toth and Randall were opposed.

Last year commissioners elected to sign an agreement with the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy to enforce a conservation easement at the 17-acre property near South Haven on Lake Michigan.

Commissioners had considered having the county enforce the easement, but were concerned that future commissions could change the pact. A neutral third party, such as the conservancy was deemed best to take charge of the property.