

Cut trees debated in Forks Twp.

Attorney: Developer doing his job. Township engineer disagrees.

By Madeleine Mathias
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The lawyer for Strausser Enterprises, a major developer in Forks Township, and a township engineer argued loudly Thursday night over who was responsible for cutting down eight maple trees that have lined Old River Road near Frost Hollow Road for more than 100 years.

Attorney Gary Asteak justified the cutting that took place within the past week as Strausser just doing its job as required by township approved development plans.

But township engineer Fred Hay disputed that. He said the trees were on the township's right of way and there were no plans that permitted their destruction.

Supervisor David Howell, visibly annoyed at Asteak's stance, called the tree cutting an act of "vandalism."

Although township officials didn't take any legal action, they went into executive session to discuss the possibility. Returning a while later, Howell told the few remaining people in the audience, most also against the tree cutting, that the township manager will be authorized to find a certified arborist who can determine the value of the trees and their condition before they were cut down.

Zoning officer Tim Weis said about five years ago that a resident of the area reported Strausser was taking down a couple of trees at the entrance to Old River Road. Weis said he notified Strausser that all but a couple of trees at the entrance were township trees and were not to be touched.

Asteak said neither he, nor Strausser nor Sal Panto, Strausser's chief operating officer, had any "malicious intent to cut down those trees. If we could preserve the trees we would have, but the road had to be widened. You said the road had to be vacated."

Asteak said the township had been pressing Strausser to get his projects done and now the township was complaining he was moving too fast.

"The plans are extremely complicated," Asteak said. "It is entirely possible you overlooked that these trees were going to be conveyed to Strausser."

Strausser has several projects in the township including a golf course and housing construction, and the Strausser firm contends the tree removal was done as part of road improvements connected to the company's projects.

Hay said Strausser was only supposed to grade the bank at Old River and Frost Hollow roads. He added that the developer was supposed to make improvements at Frost Hollow and Route 611, not Old River Road.

At one point, Hay, also showing his ire, said "Mr. Strausser does ... whatever he pleases." Hay said he had been at every meeting on the Strausser projects and the trees on Old River Road were never discussed.

Attorney Steven Goudsouzian, filling in for township solicitor Karl Kline, got Asteak to admit Strausser went on the township road and cut the trees down. Goudsouzian said that on an April 20, 2000, plan, it was written that the developer was responsible for reserving the tree line. Copyright © 2007, [The Morning Call](#)