

## The Park Purchase Plan

By Richard J. Smith

Editor's Note: Mr. Smith has very kindly prepared this narrative at our request. It is another of the historical statements about Dune Acres. We would be delighted to have your contributions toward statements of this kind.

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I have been asked to recount what happened to generate the Park Purchase Plan back in 1952, and in the telling, describe that original plan and the subsequent trade-off that led to additional Park land for the Town.

Then, as now, as you drove north into Dune Acres from the South Shore tracks to the East Road turn there were no buildings on either side of Mineral Springs Road except a very dilapidated structure since replaced on the same site by the present attractive Gate House. The old structure was a converted construction shanty known as Art's Shack. Art Johnson was our beloved marshal, genial to those whom he thought deserved access to the Town, but, through his impressive stature and impassive, stolid look, forbidding to those whom he thought did not. Then, as now, one of the enchantments of Dune Acres was this approach drive through the swamp and woodlands along Mineral Springs Road that conditions one for the idyllic world inside.

Then along came a man named Elmore. He had acquired ownership of the land on both sides of Mineral Springs Road totaling about 150 acres extending from the present Gate House North to the East Road junction with Mineral Springs Road at the foot of Clubhouse Hill, except for the Edgren land which is discussed later (see attached plat). Included within that 150 acres was all the present playground. At the time, the South boundary of the Town was an E-W line running thru that junction of East Road with Mineral Springs Road, placing virtually all the present playground area and areas South, on both sides of Mineral Springs Road, beyond the Town's boundaries.

The citizens of our Town could not bear the thought that this Elmore tract might be changed from virgin beauty into a housing development. Mr. Elmore was a Chicago real estate developer with no ties in Dune Acres.

The Town Board at that time consisted of Burgess Snyder, Leo Johnston and Lloyd Steere. It was a wise and judicious Town Board possessed of saintly patience. They held town meeting after town meeting to discuss the alternates over a period of many months. There was finally the decisive town meeting at which we reviewed the Rountree Plan, the Klarich Plan, the Lease Plan and finally the Park Purchase Plan.

The Town itself had no bonding or tax levy resources adequate to purchase the land. Town bonding power was limited to 2% of the Town's assessed valuation. The impracticability of increasing the annual tax levy as a source of funds was demonstrated when a \$1,000 budgetary item for attorney's fees for a Park Plan was protested at the State Tax Board level by some Town residents.

The Rountree Plan and the Klarich Plan both involved the purchase of this property by private interests with the probability of development of some sort however well planned it might be. The Lease Plan was to lease the property from Elmore for a term of 30 years with the objective of keeping it from being developed. It obviously was not a final solution and, in retrospect, would only have deferred development of the land. Finally the various plans were put to a vote and the Park Purchase Plan was approved.

The Park Purchase Plan was simple and painful. It required that each property owner in Dune Acres contribute his pro rata share toward the \$50,000 asking price, based on the ratio of the assessed valuation of his property to the total assessed valuation of the Town. There were about 60 houses in Dune Acres at the time. A very large part of the money would have to come from homeowners because the aggregate of assessments of unimproved lots and acreage was relatively small.

The Town Board appointed a committee consisting of Chester Bronski, Leonard Conklin, Robert Graney, James Martin, Harold Miles, L. T. Rountree and R. J. Smith, Chairman, to raise the money and carry out the purchase with understandings through which the 150 acres would be forever deeded to the Town for Town Park purposes.

The committee obtained the assessed valuations of each piece of property in town and determined the contribution required from each property owner to make up the purchase price...sums ranging from a low of about \$450 to a high of \$2,000 for homeowners.

The experience of serving with the Park Purchase committee in raising this money from our neighbors was one of life's very warm experiences. The response was extraordinary. For many of the donors, meeting their pledges meant considerable sacrifice.

A very high percentage (over 90%) of the homeowners pledged and contributed their full share, averaging \$710 per household. Many, many of the contributors went to their banks and other sources and made long term personal loans to come up with their cash donations. All pledges were paid in full.

More than 2 decades have passed since the purchase of the Elmore tract. In appreciating the financial impact on families at the time, one can apply his own multiplier to that average gift to adjust it to its present median income and dollar value equivalents. Some inquiry suggests the multiplier to be about 3, making the average gift's contemporary equivalent about \$2100.

The process of explaining the plan and soliciting pledges took months and months of hard work and one day an exhausted committee ran an adding machine tape and came up with a total of pledges barely exceeding \$42,000. They couldn't find any more money except that Burgess Snyder and Jim Martin agreed to underwrite the difference up to \$45,000, if needed. Included in the pledges was a contribution, judged by all to be a fair share, from Dune Acres, Inc., the land company that held acreage tracts of unimproved land and subdivided lots.

Armed with these pledges, Leo Johnston, who was the Dune Acres Real Estate Broker, Len Conklin and Dick Smith went to see Mr. Elmore in his Chicago office, laid out the facts and exhibited the adding machine tape. Leo waived his commission at the calculated moment and Elmore reluctantly accepted the cash offer of \$42,000. The Purchase Agreement was executed on May 12, 1953 by the Trustees acting for the corporate Town and its property owners. The Trustees were the following: Chester Bronski, Leonard Conklin, Leo Johnston, James Martin, Harold Miles, Hunton Rogers, L. T. Rountree, R. J. Smith and H. B. Snyder.

The purchase from Elmore was completed and the land was deeded outright to the Town of Dune Acres with the understanding that it be used only as Park land. The Committee had made commitments to the donors that no part of this land would ever be sold for private use. *Therefore, Dick did not participate in the Edgren contract.*

Another crisis came within a month or two. News of substantial real estate transfers always spreads like a grass fire in a high wind. Forty-eight acres of land (see the attached plat) contiguous to the Elmore tract and fronting on the west side of Mineral Springs Road, consisting of a strip about 24 acres north and 24 acres south of our present Gate House, was represented by a man named Edgren. The northern half of that tract contained excellent building sites. Mr. Edgren wanted \$9,500 for his tract to avert development by his client or his successor. But the resources of Dune Acres had been exhausted.

In the park land purchased from Mr. Elmore there were about 18 acres north of West Road and west of Mineral Springs Road designated as Tracts A, B and C on the attached plat. Leo Johnston felt the 18 acres could be divided into no more than 4 parcels, each to contain no more than one single family dwelling, and sold by the Town for a total selling price of \$9,500 to raise cash for the purchase of the Edgren tract.

Leo, the Town Board and the contributors to the Elmore tract purchase reached a consensus supporting Leo's plan on the condition that the 18 acres would never be further subdivided beyond the proposed division into 4 parcels, later determined to be the parcels A1, A2, B and C on our plat (A was divided in half). To meet the terms of the modified Elmore Purchase Trust, the acreages were sold with the understanding that the boundaries be set as proposed, that there be no more than one single family dwelling ever erected on each of the four parcels and that they never be further subdivided.

The purchase of the 48 acres of Town Park land was then made by the Town from Edgren.

Those transactions had the effect of adding a net of 30 more acres of Park land for a grand total of 180 acres of Park Land added to the Town. Omitting some swamp portions, I am advised that today this land would be appraised at \$800,000, using a value of about \$5,000 per acre.

The appraising of unimproved acreage always seems to be an esoteric subject. Accordingly, the writer offers the above only as an estimate that is vulnerable to the expertise of others.

The human experience imparted by wilderness is a unique one. A hike in either direction on the E-W trail that crosses Mineral Springs Road at the Gate House generously provides that experience. Perhaps that offers a better measure than money of what has been conserved through the Elmore-Edgren acquisitions.

The map will show more clearly the tracts and land marks discussed here.

We hope you have found this sketch of interest. And may I express again, on behalf of the community and its posterity, the ultimate in gratitude to each member of the indefatigable and able Park Purchase Plan Committee, the Town Board, and to all those property and home owners of noble and generous spirit who contributed their full shares to the Park Purchase Plan.

