



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR COMMENTARY

## New leadership can help save Bell Bowl Prairie

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By Letters to the Editor | Oct 30, 2021, 8:00am CDT



Bell Bowl Prairie. | Photo by cassi saari

Illinois has one of the strongest laws to protect natural areas of any state — the Illinois Natural Areas Preservation Act. The Act provides for dedication of land as nature preserves, and land so dedicated is protected in perpetuity from both private and governmental action. However, dedication requires the affirmative act of the landowner. As of May 2021, there were 412 dedicated nature preserves totaling 61,662 acres in

Illinois. This land has been dedicated by the owners, including the State of Illinois, forest preserve districts, and a large number of private owners. Administration of the Act is overseen by the Nature Preserves Commission, consisting of nine unpaid volunteers, and a small professional staff.

Bell Bowl Prairie is owned by the Greater Rockford Airport Authority. There seems little question that at least a portion of the prairie would qualify for nature preserve dedication, as it is of outstanding ecological quality. The prairie is threatened by expansion of the Rockford Airport. However, the airport authority has not requested nature preserve dedication and until it does, there is little the Nature Preserves Commission can do.

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Fortunately, in response to a suit filed in U.S. District Court by the Natural Land Institute, the Airport Authority agreed on Thursday evening to suspend construction until March 1. During that period, the authority will continue to consult with the FAA, Illinois DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to explore alternative designs that will protect the prairie.

The Sun-Times **editorial** correctly pointed out that the commission has been without a director for six years. During that period, other staff members have performed the duties of that role, in addition to the responsibilities of their customary positions. However, they have been handicapped by the fact that they did not have the authority to represent the commission as its director.

Fortunately, under the leadership of Colleen Callahan and John Rogner, director and assistant director of the Illinois DNR, authority to hire a director has been obtained and the search for one is well underway.

On behalf of the Nature Preserves Commission, I applaud the Sun-Times for its continuing coverage of the commission and its need for the leadership of a director.

*George Covington, chair, Illinois Nature Preserves Commission*