FHIA Deer Meeting Minutes – August 21, 2006

Dear Neighbors,

Many thanks to all of you who attended the Forest Home-Cornell deer meeting last Monday night. We had a good turnout -- more than 20 Forest Homers, eight or ten Cornell people, a Tompkins County Cooperative Extension person and one or two interested "others."

Below is a brief synopsis of the meeting for those who were unable to attend. Below that is a clarified version of a handout the FHIA Executive Board and Deer Committee prepared for the meeting.

The FHIA opened by providing background on how we got to where we were Monday night. (A fair summary is in the "Background" section in the document below.) We said we were heartened that Cornell had heard and responded to our concerns about the proposed Arboretum perimeter fence, and encouraged that the University had requested this meeting to discuss alternative strategies. Then we walked the group through the rest of the handout pasted below -- what alternatives we considered, their pros and cons, and our recommendations. Our main points were that:

(1) Forest Home and Plantations share a growing deer problem;
(2) we think that deer population management will be an essential part of any damage-control strategy; and
(3) we are eager to partner with Cornell in a genuine way as we move forward to address our shared problem.

Cornell's Executive Vice President, Steve Golding, gave a presentation about the university-wide process to determine how to manage deer damage on its many properties. He showed maps of Cornell and surrounding areas and explained that, before the University can decide what to do about the resident deer in any given location, it first has to weigh a large number of factors, from the educational value of a planting or plot to its historical importance, aesthetic value, and the impact of Cornell's actions on its neighbors. Some areas, he said, would likely need to be protected completely from damage; others would have a higher tolerance. The process to determine all this is cumbersome and complex. He hoped the University would have a set of proposals by October, at which point stakeholders (including neighborhoods) would be asked for their input. He said Cornell would like to identify four or five areas to serve as pilots, but that they haven't chosen those areas yet.

At this point, it became clear that FH people and Cornell people had come to two different meetings. The FHIA had asked Cornell (and Cornell had agreed) to be ready to talk about specific deer management measures in the Plantations and Forest Home, with the understanding that Cornell needs to take some action by this fall. We expected a technical discussion of specific options, informed by Cornell's expertise in this area. Cornell was not prepared to have that discussion.

The discussion we did have reflected FH's desire to understand what role the neighborhood was to play in the formulation of a management strategy for the deer whose range we share with the Plantations. The Cornell representatives in attendance were not able to commit to any formal role for the FHIA, whether as members of an advisory committee or partners in a pilot project. They assured us that we would be consulted when the University is ready to present a list of recommendations.

The FHIA handout follows. Please feel free to contact Jon Miller, Darcy Binns or any other executive board member if you have any thoughts or questions.

FHIA Executive Board

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handout (see next pages)

Forest Home Improvement Association Executive Board
Deer Management Overview

August 24, 2006

Background

In April of 2005, Forest Home and Cornell began a series of conversations regarding the management of the area's growing deer population. The impetus was Cornell Plantations' plan to install 2.3 miles of 10-foot high wire mesh fence along the Newman Arboretum's perimeter during that summer. Plantations officials acknowledged that fencing for the Mundy Wildflower and Botanical Gardens was likely to follow, if funding was available.

Two neighborhood forums and door-to-door canvassing revealed Forest Home's overwhelming opposition to perimeter fencing and the resulting impacts on the neighborhood. However, residents also expressed a widespread desire to partner with Cornell to find alternative solutions. The Plantations has a pressing problem: valuable plant specimens are being lost due to deer over-browsing. This problem is only going to grow. The resident deer population, estimated to be 18 during the spring of 2005, now approaches 30.

Alternatives Considered

Non-Intervention

Pros: Deer are appealing indigenous animals that bring many people pleasure. People are pleased to know that they have not directly acted to harm these creatures.

Cons: Given the favorable conditions in our area, the local deer population can be expected to continue to grow at an exponential rate, doubling every two to five years. Herds with high population densities experience increased incidences of Lyme disease, chronic wasting disease, bovine tuberculosis, fawn mortality, and malnutrition. Deer over-browsing compromises forest health by permanently changing the composition of plant and animal populations. Human health and safety are affected by exposure to Lyme disease, deer attacks on humans, and increased deer-vehicle collisions/fatalities (in New York State, 50,000 deer-vehicle collisions occur annually). Residential and commercial lands are damaged (statewide ornamental losses alone total more than $49,000,000 each year). Many communities around the country that have

first chosen non-intervention have later found themselves culling hundreds of deer.

Fertility Control

Currently there is no legal and effective fertility control product available for populations of wild deer. Regulatory hurdles include strict FDA controls concerning the release/use of contraceptive, immunocontraceptive and contragestational chemicals, as well as state laws regarding the capture of deer. Fertility control remains technically problematic in free-ranging deer. The Cayuga Heights Deer Project was stopped because treated deer became pregnant. Once a fertility control product becomes available, its best use will be to stabilize a herd's size, not to reduce the population. Culling could still be necessary prior to the application of fertility control measures.

Perimeter Fencing

Pros: Well-designed and executed fences protect all enclosed plantings from damage due to deer browsing.

Cons: Since the underlying cause of over-browsing is not addressed, the benefit to fenced properties comes at the expense of land that is not fenced. Feeding pressure is increased on adjacent properties. Blocked from their range, deer are forced onto roads, making roads more dangerous. Any deer trapped within exclosures are typically killed. Range and habitat of other animals (e.g., turtles) can be disrupted. Ten-foot high fences visually mar landscapes and severely limit access to visitors.

Culling

Pros: Annual culling of a limited number of antlerless deer (does) reduces and/or stabilizes deer populations. Because does are territorial and have relatively small ranges (200-600 acres), culling is an effective local management tool. Smaller herd sizes preserve deer and forest health, decrease over-browsing in gardens and on agricultural lands, reduce deer-vehicle collisions, and limit the spread of Lyme disease to humans. Animal experts consider sharpshooting a humane method of killing. Deer meat can be consumed locally. Nationally, no human injuries have been reported as a result of controlled hunts or sharpshooters.

Cons: Some oppose lethal measures on moral grounds; others worry about inflicting suffering on the animals. Laws concerning the discharge of firearms and bows can impede access to some properties. An ongoing commitment is required.

Selection and Location of Landscape Plantings

Pros: Planting preferred plant varieties away from known deer browsing routes can help decrease deer damage in a particular area, as can selecting less desirable plants for places where deer are known to feed.

Cons: Once food becomes scarce or the population density becomes high, deer will eat just about anything. Each deer eats several pounds of plant material per day.

Trapping and Relocation

New York State does not allow the trapping and relocation of wild deer. Among the reasons are the lack of suitable sites (land where deer densities are low) and the high mortality rate of relocated deer (more than 75% of those relocated die within a year).

Repellants, Frightening Devices, Small Exclosures

Pros: These are all non-lethal, highly localized, and readily available. Anecdotal evidence supports the efficacy of a number of new repellants and sonic devices.

Cons: These measures do not affect deer population, but merely transfer browsing damage from protected to unprotected plants and areas. Furthermore, their effectiveness decreases as feeding pressure increases. Repellants require the time-consuming process of application and re-application. Some products are noxious. Light- and noise-generating frightening devices can be disruptive to humans and other animals. Over time deer become desensitized. Small exclosures are time-consuming to set up and maintain, and many find them unattractive.

Forest Home Improvement Association Executive Board
Recommendations Regarding Deer Management
in Forest Home and Cornell Plantations

August 24, 2006

After much research and discussion, the FHIA's Executive Board and Deer Committee arrived at a set of deer management recommendations. We took our cue from conservation groups like the Audubon Society and The Nature Conservancy, numerous land trusts, other communities with large deer populations, and the findings of Cornell's own wildlife biologists. As Cornell Cooperative Extension's Paul Curtis has written, "Rapid [deer] population growth will continue as long as communities limit mortality factors (i.e., hunting and/or predation), and suitable forage is available. If people choose not to take action early in the process as problems start to develop, then communities often must remove many more deer at much greater expense at some point in the future."

Our recommendations are:

Reduce and Manage Herd Size

- Culling using sharpshooters and/or controlled hunts to reduce the population to a level the environment can sustain
- Fertility control to stabilize the population, as soon as available

Protect Valuable Plants

- Repellants and sonic frightening devices
- Small exclosures
- Strategic planting locations