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September 19, 2022

Board of Supervisors
John Adams, Chair
May Township
P.O. Box 60
Marine on St. Croix, MN 55047

Dear May Township Board of Supervisors:

We are writing to you today on behalf of the River Grove: Marine Area Community School Board of Directors to express our concern about the proposed sale of the Wilder Forest property in May Township, which includes our campus, to an outside entity that intends to establish an overnight Camp in our current location.

Since its creation in 2017, River Grove has provided a high-quality, unique, and most importantly, a local school option for families in May Township, Marine on St. Croix, Withrow, Stillwater and surrounding areas. Our school is not just a place where children learn; it is also a stitch in the fabric of our community, where parents and neighbors meet and a sense of belonging grows.

This year, River Grove began its sixth year of operation with 225 students enrolled and 75 prospective students on our waiting list. Our teachers, parents, and students feel a deep connection with the forest surrounding our school buildings and we have developed our curriculum and programming to make full use of this unique setting. Our students ski and snowshoe as integral units in physical education. They measure trees to learn geometry, study insects and plants, and read countless books under the towering pines.

Within the larger community, our children play soccer and baseball together through the SCVAA, participate in River Grove sponsored local Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, march in the Marine on St. Croix 4th of July parade, and attend community events in Marine, Stillwater, and Withrow.

Staff at the Minnesota Guild, our school's authorizer, consider River Grove to be a "rising star" and an example of success for other beginning charter schools in our state. Upon issuing our 5-year contract renewal this July, Minnesota Guild's Executive Director Jim Zacchini congratulated River Grove on our exemplary progress over the past five years and noted that our school "has remained true to its mission and focus of developing academically successful students ready to succeed in life."

As we've grown and evolved as a school, we've worked closely with Wilder Foundation and May Township to develop our long-range vision. Knowing that Wilder hoped to eventually sell the property, our intention has always been to: 1) form an affiliated building company, which our administration has already begun working towards, to purchase our campus once we've been in operation for 6 years (July 2023 for River Grove, per Minnesota State Statute), or 2) identify a friendly buyer who can purchase the land and work with us to continue operating in the Forest through a long-term lease.

Toward this end, Wilder staff have attended public meetings with River Grove families and May Township officials. They have helped us to negotiate updates to our Conditional Use Permit and reassured worried parents that the Foundation would not sell the land out from underneath our school.

You can imagine our surprise, and extreme disappointment, when we received notice that the Wilder Foundation intends to sell the property to an outside buyer instead. If the proposed sale of Wilder Forest goes forward, it will be devastating to our school and the larger community.

In addition to hosting River Grove's campus, the Wilder property is also home to Big River Farms, an incubator farm that provides immigrant, refugee, and BIPOC farmers with land access and training; this is a unique program found nowhere else in Minnesota. Terrapin, Clear and Mays Lakes are three of the most pristine shallow lakes in this ecoregion, and the surrounding landscape is one of the highest priority locations for permanent land protection in Washington County.

Over the past five years, we have taught our students to be good stewards of the land surrounding our school. They have removed invasive buckthorn, planted native flowers to support pollinators, cleared overgrown trails, and studied macroinvertebrates from Mays Lake to learn about food webs, ecosystems, and lake water quality. We have also worked to develop our relationship with Big River Farms so that students are able to learn about different cultures, dig their hands in the dirt, and watch squash and pumpkins grow. Our students and families are trained and invested in caring for this land.

The River Grove School Community has also invested thousands of volunteer hours, and over \$400,000 in public taxpayer funds toward maintenance, upkeep, and improvement of the school campus and its buildings, and long-range planning to meet requirements of our May Township CUP. This investment has happened on top of the \$1,500,000 in taxpayer-funded lease aid we have paid to Wilder Foundation during the past five years.

Today, we are asking for your support to help River Grove continue as a community school.

We have also sent a letter to the Wilder Foundation Board of Directors asking them to reserve the portion of the Wilder Forest where our school campus is located until we are able to form an affiliated building company to purchase the land and buildings next year.

Alternatively, it is our understanding that Manitou Fund has expressed interest in purchasing the Wilder Foundation property. Given how supportive Manitou has been of River Grove and our programming, we feel this could be a strong ongoing partnership that would provide long-term security and support for our school and the neighboring Big River Farms, both which are important pillars in the local community.

We ask that May Township officials leverage any decision-making power within your legal authority to help River Grove achieve the above objectives so that we can ensure a permanent, long-term location for our unique school and continue to serve students and families in the community for years to come.

Sincerely,

River Grove: Marine Area Community School Board of Directors

Jessica Hansen, Chair
Lisa Dochniak, Vice Chair
Katie Bruns, Treasurer
Angie Hong, Secretary
Annie Beck

CC:

Drew Goodson, River Grove Executive School Director
Shirley Volk, River Grove Director of Student Services