



NEWS RELEASE

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Media Contact: Drew Goodson
Director of River Grove Elementary
dgoodson@marineareaschool.org
651-409-3122

River Grove Elementary, A MN Public Charter School, Surprised to Learn it May Lose its Wilder Forest Home

On the heels of Covid shut downs and turmoil, the students of River Grove, their families and community at large were excited to finally begin a 'normal year.' River Grove elementary school is described as a magical place and its students and community are thriving. But news in the last two weeks has left the River Grove community stunned.

River Grove Elementary school, officially known as the Marine Area Community School, was founded in 2016 after the Marine, Withrow and Oak Park elementary schools were scheduled to close due to district restructuring. The school found its home in May Township on the land just north of Stillwater known as Wilder Forest, leased from the Wilder Foundation. Their school model is unique; with students spending approximately 50% of their school day outdoors and learning in nature, and has received accolades and spectacular results. River Grove is at their current enrollment max of 225 students, with over 75 students on the waiting list. Many of the 225 students in attendance found River Grove because they were struggling in traditional school settings. In fact, more than 30% of their student population receives special education services, when the MN state special education average was 16.9% in 2021, according to the Kids Count Data Center. At a community meeting on Tuesday, River Grove parent Nicole stated that her second grader who was struggling at other schools is now thriving.

In addition to having strong parent support, River Grove has an incredible group of teachers, staff members and community partners who are dedicated to not only the students, but also being stewards of the land. The 600 acres of land owned by the Wilder Foundation, some currently leased by River Grove, is home to two pristine lakes, bogs, wetlands, mature hardwood forests and is located in a priority conservation area. This past weekend, River Grove teachers were at an educational retreat hosted by Manitou Fund to further their partnered land stewardship and nature-based education training. The partnership between River Grove and Manitou Fund is strong. Enough so that Manitou Fund, commonly known as Warner Nature Center, delivered a cash purchase agreement for \$11 million to Wilder Foundation on Friday September 23, 2022 with a 30 day due diligence period and a 5 day close; in order to continue River Grove's educational success and further their land conservation and nature education partnership. Manitou Fund expeditiously sent their purchase agreement to



Wilder Foundation after May Township had been notified on September 19, 2022 that Wilder Foundation had received an offer for the sale of the land to an outside party.

For unknown reasons, River Grove was notified on Monday, September 26, 2022 that Wilder Foundation was declining the clean and matching purchase agreement from Manitou Fund to continue forward with an offer from Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership, a newly formed organization that plans to build a camp on the site. Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership appears to have grown from 'Extreme Faith Camp' and plans to own and run the camp under an operating agreement with Ohio-based Damascus Catholic Mission Campus. They have previously stated that their goal is to build a 25,000 square foot lodge that holds 1,000 people in addition to cabins for 350 – 400 people and a retreat center. River Grove was notified on Tuesday, September 27, that Wilder Foundation had signed a purchase agreement with Minnesota Catholic Youth Partnership with a 9 to 12 month closing and confidential terms.

Since coming to the forest, River Grove has continually expressed its desire and commitment to purchase its school campus either directly or in partnership with Manitou Fund after its sixth year of operation when Minnesota public charter schools are allowed to purchase land and buildings through an affiliated building company. River Grove is currently in its sixth year of operation and has shown its commitment through the investment of over \$300,000 in public taxpayer funds and thousands of volunteer hours towards maintenance, upkeep and improvement to the school campus. This is in addition to the \$1,500,000 lease obligations already paid to Wilder Foundation during the past five years. It had been communicated to River Grove by Kelly Urista, Property Management Director at Wilder Foundation, that it would be morally wrong to not give River Grove and Manitou Fund first option to purchase and / or first right of refusal. But River Grove and Manitou Fund were largely kept in the dark about the sale.

May Township is concerned for the environmental impacts of the Wilder Forest land usage, and both River Grove and Manitou Fund have a proven history of being stewards of the land. But what will happen if a large camp operation takes ownership of the land? What happens to Big River Farms, an organization also leasing some of the land, that teaches organic and sustainable farming to marginalized farmers? And what about the 225 thriving elementary students who will lose the home of their community school for the second time in six years?

Manitou Fund, in partnership with River Grove Elementary, continues to be interested in purchasing the land from Wilder Foundation.