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Guest column

Looking for deer solutions

By Judith Granbois
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Guest columnist

This guest column is by Bloomington resident Judith Granbois, who is a member of the Bloomington-Monroe County Deer Task Force.

The Bloomington-Monroe County Deer Task Force consists of 11 volunteers appointed by Bloomington's City Council, Monroe County Commissioners, and the mayor or serving ex officio. Its membership represents a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, including animal welfare, science, gardening and hunting.

The group was established in response to growing public concern about the presence of deer in the urban and suburban environment as well as their ecological impact at Griffy Lake. We are charged with drafting advisory recommendations for review by the city, county and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Members are dedicated to acting collaboratively to develop recommendations that are pragmatic and prudent.

The task force began meeting monthly in September 2010. Working with biologists from the IDNR and Indiana University, we began by informing ourselves about deer biology and behavior. Although funding limitations preclude a census, Indiana DNR-compiled statistics on deer-vehicle collisions and hunting harvest as well as scientific research conducted at Griffy indicate that the local population is maintained at a high level.

We have explored the effectiveness of a variety of deer management strategies that have been tried in other communities throughout the United States. In evaluating these options, we are using criteria including effectiveness, cost, safety, humane treatment and community acceptance.

Management of white-tailed deer is complex and challenging. One approach that is sometimes suggested, for example, is trapping and translocation. This strategy is costly and impractical, however. Suitable sites for relocation simply do not exist, as most areas already host robust populations. Further, the stress of trapping can seriously harm deer by causing capture myopathy, which may lead to high rates of delayed mortality.

The task force is considering a broad menu of choices in deer management, including planting deer-resistant plants, using deterrents, fencing, contraception, surgical sterilization, regulated hunting and lethal methods. None of these options has been ruled out.

In the next phase of its work, the task force will actively seek input from community residents. We want to hear from the public. A series of several community outreach meetings will begin in late June. For a meeting near you, please see our website.

In addition, a survey is being prepared to solicit public opinion on the issues related to human-deer interaction.

All task force meetings are open to the public, and time is set aside at each meeting for public comment. Your comments or questions are also welcome through email at deertaskforce@bloomington.in.gov or by calling 349-3409.

Please visit our website (www.bloomington.in.gov/deertaskforce) for more information about our work and for frequently asked questions about deer behavior, management approaches and tips that can help to mitigate deer damage.

It is clear that area residents are deeply divided in their attitudes toward deer. No matter what conclusions the task force may reach, some segment of the community is bound to raise objections. Task force members are determined to evaluate management options through a thoughtful deliberative process. Again, these issues are challenging and complex, and the public deserves thorough and judicious consideration of the options.

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