

# ST. JOHN LUTHERAN SCHOOL Krugler Conservation Center



The goal for this project is to create and sustain an outdoor education center for our children at St. John as well as the community. To accomplish this goal the committee needed to ensure the land is developed as a school forest and wildlife preserve, file all necessary paperwork with the city, county, and state to develop the land, and create short-term and long-term goals and strategic plans to ensure the sustainability of Krugler Conservation Center.

Though not much was accomplished on the land itself much of the paperwork and permits have been obtained. The committee entered into this project understanding this has the potential to be a three-year process from beginning to end. Thus far, the results of this project are:

1. Team created with each member having a different skill set
2. Applied and received a privy permit
3. Conditional land use application will be accepted
4. Applied for twenty-five grants to help support this project
5. Forestry Plan Completed
6. Education Plan Completed
7. Privy built
8. Tax Exempt Status completed using Wildlife Preserve and Bible Camp statutes

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# Krugler Conservation Center

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## Project Focus

St. John Lutheran School is a Preschool-8 Missouri Synod Lutheran school serving 203 students in North Central Wisconsin. St. John Lutheran Church supports the school with weekly worship of over 1,100 members. The church and school has served the Merrill community for over 125 years. Outdoor activities and education play a major role in the life of Merrill area residents.

St. John currently has a strong science curriculum. Our students rank very high in standardized testing. The school is in the top 16 percent of the nation for science. Students also achieve high grades once they leave St. John and attend local high schools. As a school, we always look at what can we do better.

This past year, St. John received eighty acres of land via a will. Half of the land is wooded and the other half is prairie. According to the will, the purpose of the land is to be used to promote education. With this land donated to our school, we would like to develop a school forest. Our school located is in North Central Wisconsin, where the environment is always important, as well as the preservation of natural resources. The school forest would give students the ability to learn about God's creation outside of the classroom, with the idea of more hands-on activities and real-life experiences.

## Process of Creating a School Forest

The land willed by Fred Krugler was signed over in April 2011, and sat idle until Van Lunen. Talking with consultant John Cissel, he asked good initial questions to get the project started. A committee was created all with each member having a different area of expertise.

At the first meeting, the committee started with many questions which were raised by John Cissel. With the knowledge of our committee, we were able to get many questions answered as well as continue on a path which would make the school forest successful.

We created a name for the school forest, The Krugler Conversation Center (KCC), so members within the congregation as well as the community would be able to recognize the name and purpose. A mission statement and an overall goal were developed to help the committee, foundations, church and community interests understand what the KCC was all about.

**KCC Mission Statement:** To enrich the lives of children and community through outdoor education; focusing on exploration, development, growth, stewardship, and respect. Creation and sustainability of the the center is met

with our environmental, physical and monetary resources utilizing the talents of St. John students, staff, members, and volunteers.

**KCC Goal:** Create and sustain an outdoor education center for our children and community.

With the help of Mr. Cissel, our committee, created a three-phase vision plan. Phase one creates an Education Plan, Forestry Plan, and building a privy. Phase two includes building an outdoor shelter and equipment storage area and inviting school and community members to the KCC. Phase three consists of building a retreat center, creating trails, unique experiences other area forests and camps may not have, and involving the community as well as other schools to use the building and land. The over-arching question for the KCC board and this project is: What will make other schools or committees come to the KCC?

Within the three-phase vision plan, the committee created seven goals for the year. The first is to ensure the Krugler Land is developed as a school forest. St. John realized a forestry plan would need to be created which would help with grants, an educational plan, and tax purposes. Also the committee understood the process and needed to enlist the land as a school forest with the Wisconsin Center of Environmental Education. To help alleviate the cost the committee looked at getting the land tax exempt. The third goal was try to obtain building and land use permits to allow the committee to continue the pursuit of a school forest. Obtain a rough concept of the retreat center for classes to spend time overnight as well as have other groups come to the KCC is the fourth goal. The fifth, sixth, and seventh goal are somewhat related which are to create funding by seeking and applying for grants. The purpose of three separate goals was to find funds for the retreat center only, funds for day-to-day operational costs, and physically seeking out stakeholders with a love for conservation, science and the outdoors who are willing to provide for this project. The committee understood this would be a multi-year project, as items do not move very fast within our church or in the community of Merrill.

## **Project Results**

There are many items that were accomplished during the past twelve months. When looking at the land there has not been much accomplished. All of the time and effort was done behind the scenes, which opens the door for the project to continue. Communication with the building and grounds committee, the planning committee and our church council has been open. They are excited about this project and understand what it could do for the school, the church, and the surrounding community.

A forester assessed the land and donated his time and talents to create a forestry plan for St. John. The public school forest director and our science teacher created an educational plan for classes to start attending the KCC. A privy is being built this summer. Funds and a building permit were acquired to make this happen. A conditional land use permit was also acquired which allows

this land to be registered as a school forest and for it to be used differently from a residential or commercial plot of land.

The tax-exempt status has caused the most grief for our committee, lawyers, and the Wisconsin School Forest Educational Specialist. In 2004, the state of Wisconsin no longer would allow private organizations to have more than ten acres of land be tax exempt. State statutes however did say a private school may have up to thirty acres fall under tax-exempt status if it was a bible camp. The committee looked at many different ideas, ranging from paying the taxes, being part of the managed forest land program, to donating the land to Merrill Area Public schools with the stipulation it cannot be sold, but developed as a secondary school forest, with private schools having the first choice to use the land.

In talking with the Department of Revenue, they came up with another idea. Designate the land as a wildlife preserve, which allows unlimited amount of acres, with reasonable restrictions. The question then came what is a reasonable restriction? After talking to two lawyers, it was determined as long as it was open to the public and followed the restrictions of public school forests that would be deemed as reasonable restrictions. Ten reasonable restrictions have been created, based off several public school forests' rules and restrictions. After talking with KCC committee, building and grounds committee, and planning committee, it decided to have thirty acres as bible camp land, to protect the retreat center when built, and fifty acres designated as wildlife preserve. Creating a wildlife preserve allows the church and school to have another outlet for ministry within our community.

Halfway through the year, it was brought to the attention of the committee and the school board; this group was going against the constitution of St. John by not following the right processes. This really slowed the progress of the school forest. In the end all of the motions and ideas have passed, and support for the project has increased exponentially.

## **Project Analysis and What I Have Learned**

Considering I have never completed a building project, this has been a wonderful experience and it is just beginning. The first order of business was to create a team with more knowledge in different areas than you. Have a team that is diverse, with different expertise and not afraid to ask questions to promote the process. The KCC committee has been great to work with and I have learned many different ideas and concepts.

After our mistake midway through the year, we realized communicating the vision to the congregation is an absolute necessity. There are more stakeholders involved and excited about the project now. After research and analysis and finding there is something I wish to achieve I dive in. Some within in our KCC committee and especially within our congregation does not allow this to happen. Movement within a single congregation school is slow, which can be

frustrating. The congregation with all of its boards and proper channels really slow the process down.

We are trying to use private donors for funds instead of fully relying on grants. Grants typically come in on a bi-yearly basis. Some aspects need to be accomplished sooner than when the grants come in. For this reason, we will solicit private donors vested in the vision of the project to donate money for the project.

With some of the problems taking on a project of this magnitude, there are going to be bumps in the road. That being said, the team members and school board have begun to communicate greatly with the congregation. Communicating the vision to the congregation is an absolute need. Getting more stakeholders involved and excited about this project is key. Every board we have presented the project to has expressed excitement about a school forest. Group, businesses, and private donors have also started giving to the project. It has been very exciting to all people involved.