

# ROSEMOUNT Town Pages

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## **Empire wants bigger voice in planning**

*Trey Mewes, Intern*

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Empire Town Board members expressed concern this week about University of Minnesota plans for a natural area known as Vermillion Highlands.

Part of the highlands property, adjacent to the UMore park property, will be a research park for the U. Acquired by the state in 2006, the property is jointly managed by the university and the state Department of Natural Resources. The Vermillion Highlands steering committee released a draft of its concept master plan for the property earlier this month. It calls for 1,000 acres of the land to be used for university research, with the rest of the land going to public use. Steering committee officials hope to combine visitor, administrative, and interpretive facilities into two buildings on the property, also hoping to move or close several existing roads on the property in order to maximize trails running through the area.

State officials propose 170th Street be closed from the east, and to allow 170th Street to act as an access point to the property's secondary service complex, as well as an expanded shooting range and the UMore park property to the north. 190th Street going through the property would remain closed, being moved to the western boundary of the wildlife management area state and university officials propose. Snowmobile trails would be moved out of the area because they fall on an area steering committee officials propose be used for hunting and trapping. New equestrian trails will be built in the northwestern portion of Vermillion Highlands to separate horseback riding from the rest of the trails on the property.

Although the Empire Township board isn't opposed to the steering committee's propositions for the property, board chairman Terry Holmes said Empire Township needs to have a larger say in what will take place in the Vermillion Highlands property.

"We think we need someone at a very high level to help make decisions," Holmes said. "You're entirely in Empire. You're not any place else."

Holmes said the board was concerned that state, county, and university officials were planning what to do with the property without allowing Empire Township to have a say in proposed ideas. Holmes used the expanded shooting range proposal as one example of how Empire Township needed to be involved.

Empire Township has mandated the Dakota County Gun Club keep a small presence on the Vermillion Highlands property because of past complaints over noise, traffic and other subjects. The gun club has maintained a small membership and works well under the township's mandate, according to Holmes. Yet the state legislature has passed a resolution that the steering committee do a study and design for a shooting sport facility on the highlands property, according to Larry Laukka, the university's senior advisor for UMore Park.