

SAPCC Environment Committee Meeting Feb. 24, 2021

Members Present: Michael Russelle (co-chair), Stephen Mastey (co-chair), Karlyn Eckman, Rennie Gaither, Manu Junemann, Gordon Murdock, Karen Nelson, Betty Wheeler

Guests: Liz Hixson and Anne Gardner, from the City of St. Paul Parks and Recreation Dept.

Meeting called to order by Co-Chair Russelle at 7:02. Abbreviated introductions were made, in the interest of time.

A motion to approve the minutes of the last meeting was made by Mastey; it was seconded by Eckman. It was unanimously approved, with no abstentions.

Westgate Park

Hixson and Gardner were in attendance to make a short presentation, to update this committee on the (few) changes they have made since their full presentation to the community on Feb. 2, 2021.

The design changes made recently which they mentioned include:

- a. - More native plants will be part of the design.
- b. - They are planning for a bee-friendly lawn.
- c. - They are consciously planning for an “intentional design.”
- d. - There may be more interior paths.

Feedback from the community survey included 138 responses total. That is a good response rate. Most of the respondents live within 1-2 blocks of the park. The themes from the survey include:

- a. - to concentrate on the environmental aspects of the park;
- b. - to include native plantings;
- c. - to honor native cultures from this area;
- d. - to accommodate the needs of multiple generations (particularly because there is a wide mix of generations living in the nearby apartment buildings); and
- e. - the community wants a list of desired amenities (particularly including the globe-shaped climbing structure in one of the play areas, as shown in the city’s presentation).

The items requested in the feedback must fit into the regulatory requirements of Parks, the budget constraints, and the historical and geographic location of the park. Requests for public arts will require a longer process (so will need to be done later). Also, items like the connection to the Wabasha trail, a park pavilion and educational items will have to wait until Phase 2, because there is no money in the current budget for now.

Many general ideas and specific items were then discussed between the committee and the presenters. Several committee members expressed their appreciation of the design changes and additions that have been made to the park since the original design, that we feel will make a difference in the environmental resiliency and for better amenities for the community.

Other specific minor changes or items to be aware of were discussed, such as:

- a. - carefully inspecting soil quality and doing necessary remediation;
- b. - providing irrigation for newly planted trees;
- c. - pros and cons of impervious paths: balancing our desire to limit impervious material with ADA requirements, also not narrowing sidewalks too much for comfortably passing other

users;

- d. - using wood chips under play areas;
- e. - removing the fence on the east (toward Sunrise Bank) and the one on the south that blocks walking through to the Wabasha trail;
- f. - ensuring a connection to the Sunrise Bank parking lot (as requested by Sunrise Banks);
- g. - ensuring an accessible connection to the Wabasha trail;
- h. - bike racks and trash can placement (to not create a barrier at an entrance);
- i. - bringing prairie plants out from under tree shade;
- j. - looking carefully at the mix of seeds they will use for the savanna-woodland;
- k. - ways to make sure the city mowers don't hit and debark the trees (such girdling damages and kills trees);
- l. - locating trees on both the East and West sides of the park, for beauty and also privacy from and for the neighborhood;
- m. - using trees to shade seating areas (especially near play areas);
- n. - using a higher quality herbaceous layer, even if that will necessitate a reduction of tree size;
- o. - curb cuts for wheelchairs, bikes, prams, etc.; and
- p. - adding one or more items to honor the historical context (particularly, the Red River Oxcart Trail).

One particular item we had asked for was for a stormwater infiltration gallery. They said they found out that Capitol Region Watershed District (CRWD) has no money in their 2-year budget to help develop innovative stormwater plans for this park; the most that CRWD could help with is a little bit of money for trails. Also, they never received any 'buy-in' by the developers in this area for any area-wide type of stormwater control project. However, they noted the developers supposedly provided materials in select locations, anticipating one or more tree trenches. So they are planning to investigate where the tree trench materials are located. They are also planning to contour the park so that the lawn is depressed; both will enhance infiltration. However, their understanding is that the underlying material is fairly sandy so they don't expect current soils to block infiltration. They envision that the engineer's report will help.

They also reported to the committee that the report from Dominionium (the developers of surrounding apartments and previous owners of this land) has not yet been submitted. They are looking for that report. For now, they will next hire an engineer to draw up the official site plans and pursue a geotechnical report. When they finalize the plan design, they will notify this committee. They are aiming for completion in the spring of 2021. They feel they have now provided us enough feedback, but they will inform us if there are changes. That concluded the Parks Department's presentation, so Hixson, Gardner and Nelson left the meeting.

Catalytic Converter Thefts

We then discussed the neighborhood's on-going problems with catalytic converter thefts. Eckman reports that there is a bill at the State Legislature to address these problems; but it hasn't yet passed, so we will have to wait and see what happens. One thing that can be done is to have a shield put on your car that makes it much more difficult for thieves to steal it, but the shield and installation are costly.

Kasota Ponds

Next we discussed where we are on projects concerning the Kasota Ponds. The placement last weekend of the basking logs for turtles was quite successful, especially because we had some young men volunteers. We also got some good pictures from that event.

Do we need to follow up with some information for NAPA or PK Management (PKM)? Eckman said she spoke with PKM a few weeks ago about piling up plowed snow by the pond and she will contact them again.

We need to continue buckthorn control, additional plantings and turtle access to the ponds. Mastey reported that he thinks we should try for a Minnesota Watershed Management Organization (MWMO) planning grant. We will need a 25% match, and it needs to be submitted in about 3 weeks to meet the deadline. Eckman and Russelle volunteered to help Mastey in writing the grant.

Where do we need to attack the buckthorn for this year? What are our priorities for this year?

First, we discussed the land ownership around the East Pond. The first property to the east of the NAPA parking lot, beginning at the soil/asphalt boundary, belongs to Minnesota Commercial. The public land is beyond that. As the East Pond is a DNR-designated wetland, it is public land with a 50' (or 75') right-of-way around it.

The land to the south of the NAPA building used to belong to Union Pacific (the map Mastey was showing says "Chicago & Northwestern Transportation", but it is at least 2-3 years old).

There is a lot of buckthorn just east, off the PKM-NAPA parking lot. However, it is quite steep there, so it is hard to work on (and riskier) by volunteers. It is easier for volunteers to work on the buckthorn around the West Kasota Pond and the northern part of the East Pond where it is less steep. But the dense buckthorn just west and south of the East Pond also produces a lot of seeds and should be removed too.

Eckman suggested for efficiency that perhaps we should use chainsaws and initially just whack away at the trees, leaving only stumps, which then would not produce seeds in the near future.

Mastey requested that everyone on the committee to email him a wish list and priorities for the Kasota Ponds work in the next few days, to help write planning grant from the MWMO. These items should be whatever is most meaningful for protecting habitat and/or water quality.

Russelle posed questions for everyone to think about:

- a. - Where, exactly, do we need to concentrate our efforts this year?
- b. - What are the most important techniques to keep buckthorn in check but that will not increase erosion in doing so?
- c. - How do we encourage better species to grow than buckthorn, that will provide better food and habitat?

Eckman noted that the Science Museum of Minnesota and the St. Croix Research Center use goats on sites for about 2-3 weeks per year to control buckthorn. It was discussed that the goats would need to be trailered, penned for the night with good movable fencing, goat security, etc.; in other words, goats would come with a lot of management issues and extra expenses. In addition, the goats are in high demand and may be difficult to get.

So a forestry mower would be much faster (and probably cheaper overall), but an important part of the area is too steep to be safe for the mower. Murdock suggested that a mower with an extendable arm could be especially useful in the steep areas. Other areas could be cut with a 'brush hog'-style (rotary) mower.

Mastey said that forestry standards would be to mow buckthorn and then overdress it with more than 1 foot of soil. We could harvest the soil from the East Pond, which would also provide nutrients for the newly planted growth. This would be a chemical-free way to control

the buckthorn. Eckman said we could use temporary green plastic fencing as a barrier, until the new plantings get established.

Mastey stipulated that better maintenance of the Kasota Ponds is required; that whoever contributes water to the ponds should be required to assist in the maintenance. Eckman suggested that, because MnDOT contributes water (and salt) to the East Pond from all the land east of the pond, maybe we could get help from MnDOT, for instance, to do the dredging.

Eckman mentioned there are springs in the northeastern part of the ponds, to be careful of when dredging. She also discussed the concern that pocket mussels have been found in that pond, and maybe other species of mussels as well. They should not be dredged up and put on shore to dry out and die. Mastey said the reason why this type of maintenance only dredges no more than 20% of an area at a time, is to keep most of the small critters in place and to keep them reproducing.

Mastey also recalled that we did "Phase 1" work on the northern side of the East Pond about two years ago. He thinks we need to get that area stabilized; it is usually particularly good to stay on the areas already begun, until they are finished, rather than go from place to place and never quite finish any part satisfactorily. If we would finish that area, then we could use it as a demonstration area. One problem with this approach, however, is that the other trees around the Pond continue to be a rich seed source that birds will spread.

Russelle remembered that the SAP Garden Club has some funds and wondered if maybe they would be willing to contribute some money for replanting trees in areas near the Kasota Ponds. He also mentioned that NAPA probably likes the visual barrier that the buckthorn affords from their site. So they might really want that area replanted, once the buckthorn is cut down there. Mastey mentioned we could include the Garden Club as a partner on the grant if they contribute funds; or NAPA if they are willing to contribute. Funds or in-kind from any such partner could help with our match.

Eckman asked what is the maximum amount of an MWMO planning grant? We think it is \$20,000. Mastey mused whether the MWMO would waive the match here, and what might their priorities for the Kasota Ponds be.

Eckman then asked whether bio-remediation could be used, such as beetles to feed on the buckthorn? (Or beavers?)

Gaither asked what remediation ideas anyone has for the West Pond or the North Pond. The West Pond is 9 feet deep and has clear water and a sandy bottom. It also has had many turtles over the years. It is the pond least impacted by chlorides. Lots of buckthorn was cut there this past summer. Eckman remembered that, about 20 years ago, a large amount of cattails was hauled in and attempted to be transplanted into that pond. However, the turtles ate it all because they pull up vegetation when they eat. So trying to establish cattails at that time failed. However, there is some hardstem bullrush around the West Pond. There is artificial cover (asphalt, concrete, etc.) right up to the pond along parts of the pond. Bullrushes along the southern edge of the pond is all that remains from the original pond edge-wetland habitat.

Russelle volunteered to contact the MN Commercial railroad, because he has the name of their contact person (from when we did the cleanups). He will ask them if they will help us.

Eckman volunteered to contact Minnesota Commercial and to see if they would be willing to mow the buckthorn. (If we can find any entity, such as the railroad, to do some of the work, potentially we could count them as an in-kind match for our match to the grant.)

Russelle and Eckman volunteered to help Mastey write the MWMO grant.

WestRock and Air Quality Problems

Russelle began the discussion on air quality problems and emissions stemming from WestRock. People along University are frequently asking about the smell and reporting that the air sometimes burns their nasal passages and throats. He used to think the main thing in the WestRock emissions was steam; (probably because that is what we were told).

However, we have since learned there are some noxious compounds emitted there, because the MPCA requires all emissions to be recorded. But the public record only provides annual emissions totals. What we do know now is that nitrogen oxides (NO_x), sulfur dioxide (SO₂), and aromatic carbon compounds are emitted. But what we really need is real-time quantitative concentrations of these compounds in the air, in order to correlate with local impacts and determine if there are actual health problems. We don't know these things now, and would need to get this specific data in order to know how to move forward, to work with WestRock for change.

Murdock asked if anyone knows if there is any group in South SAP that might take ownership of this question. Mastey suggested perhaps we should ask the Desnoyer Park community if they are doing anything in this regard. He requested that (SAPCC Executive Director) Kathryn Murray reach out to Desnoyer Park, to see what they are doing.

Junemann stated she contacted WestRock last year but did not get much response from them. She also had a conversation with Mike Gunderson, who told her he might put a monitor on another building in the area.

Russelle said that small portable air quality monitors are now much cheaper than they used to be, but the project might need several monitors. Junemann said she lives close by, in that area, and could accommodate a monitor at her place.

Murdock asked if Mitra could be contacted, perhaps to find a way to obtain more monitoring. We are not sure if this is within her purview.

Russelle asked Junemann if there are any chat lists or email lists for people living along the Green Line? She said no, there is only a list within her building. In her group, there are five to ten people on the transportation committee. Russelle mentioned that Steve Ray lives at the Carleton Lofts and has an interest in the topic.

Junemann contacted Erin at the MPCA. Erin's response is that "they [West Rock] are compliant." That is all she would say. Junemann also wrote an email to the City Council about the emissions. Also, she thinks the woman at the Music School in SSAP might know someone at WestRock.

Russelle said he is not sure if the MPCA is really the right agency that could help us the most. Maybe we would need someone who does air modeling work and evaluates health impacts.

Junemann was having some difficulties with her internet at this point, when she was asking about additional ways to clean up air pollution.¹

Wheeler discussed our previous work with the MPCA with some air quality monitors in SAP in the last several years.² We had a continuous monitor in the Community Gardens for one year (2016-17). We still have one monitor in the patio area of the Urban Growler that was set up 2 years ago (beginning in 2019), and expect it will be there all of this year (because it is a 3-year

project). That is the closest air monitor we know of in this area; the next closest one is in NSAP on a St. Paul Public Schools building.

Junemann said she would work on this issue. Eckman speculated that maybe Lisa Habeck would be willing to help on this, because she has worked on air quality issues regarding emissions from open burning. Wheeler said she would contact Junemann with the email contacts she has had with the MPCA, from the previous work, but Wheeler cannot do a lot on this issue this year.

At that point, the meeting was adjourned.

Update #1:

¹ The following was emailed by Junemann to the committee, after the meeting, to explain what she meant to contribute, when her internet gave her trouble.

“Here are my thoughts from when the connection went bad at the end of our meeting. I would like to see an approach of air pollution (climate change) in the area from two sides: Keep working on reducing pollutants and expand the number of trees (or any plants) in South Saint Anthony as quickly as possible. Regarding West Rock, the federal permit will not expire until March 2023 which will probably be a long term effort.

“Trees reduce urban air pollution, ... cities around the world are looking to harness them. In January 2019, the **mayor of London announced that 7,000 trees would be planted before the end of the** following year. **Paris is planning an urban forest that will encompass its most iconic landmarks** in an effort to adapt to climate change, and also improve the city’s air quality.”

“Norway maple provides more benefits to air quality than any other tree“

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200504-which-trees-reduce-air-pollution-best>

Michael mentioned that there were some interested businesses in south Saint Anthony Park. Is there a list of companies that are willing to do work on this? Any thoughts or ideas?”

Update #2:

² One additional air quality monitoring project the Environment Committee conducted was a small study with individual air quality handheld monitors (AirBeams), in 2016, with help from the MPCA. The monitors were paired with an Android app called “Air Casting.” It was a very short study with 20 volunteers, but ended with inconclusive results, mostly because the primary data that the MPCA wanted to collect was the participants’ feedback on ease of use of the monitors, not specifically on data produced. So actual data on air quality from that study were not released to us. We also did not get any real information on the accuracy of the monitors.

Respectfully submitted, Betty Wheeler