

A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park

A Proposal of the Lake Elmo Parks Commission

March 2015

I. Purpose

In December 2013, a subcommittee of the Lake Elmo Parks Commission was charged with developing a long-term vision for the development of Sunfish Lake Park that can serve as a blueprint to city leaders through 2030. It is anticipated that this guide plan will foster improved decision-making, provide an effective timeline for development of the park, increase responsiveness to citizen requests and needs, and enhance the efficiency by which city resources are committed to the park. This plan was first reviewed by the Parks Commission as a whole on November 17, 2014, revised and approved by the Parks Commission on March 16, 2015, and forwarded for review by the City Council.

II. A History of Sunfish Lake Park

Sunfish Lake Park is by far the largest park in the Lake Elmo park system, with a total of 256 acres of forest, wetlands, and Sunfish Lake itself. Consisting mostly of land that has never been farmed owing to its thick woodland, steep slopes, and extensive wetlands, the park was created through \$750,000 park bond referendum that was passed by the citizens of Lake Elmo in 1974. The land was purchased at a significantly discounted price from owners who were committed to saving it from development, and the bond was presented to the people of Lake Elmo as a means of preserving the natural beauty of a unique wilderness for hiking trails, observing nature, cross-country skiing and other passive uses. The parkland has been described by the Nature Conservancy as having one of the best upland forest in Washington County.

Following purchase of the land, citizen volunteers planted over 5,000 trees in the park in 1975, and the city authorized expenditures to create a network of natural walking, hiking, and cross-country ski trails throughout the park as well as a split-lane entry and exit road to a dirt parking lot on the south side of the park. In May 1992, in response to citizen signatures, safety concerns, an original referendum, and ecology testimony from the DNR and Nature Conservancy, and following an examination of the park's trails by the Washington County Soil & Water Conservation District (which declared them especially prone to erosion), the Lake Elmo City Council (supported by a unanimous recommendation of the Parks Commission) passed an ordinance banning mountain biking and biking in general within the park.

In 2008, in still another significant effort on the part of the citizens of Lake Elmo to ensure that the original intent of the park – to preserve the land while encouraging passive uses of its trails – was sustained, the Parks Commission collaborated with the City Council and professional staff to create a permanent land trust easement with the Minnesota Land Trust that encompassed the entire park. This critical step, which affirmed and effectively codified the conservationist ethos informing the historical development and contemporary usage of the park, established strict parameters for preserving this unique natural resource in our city. Contained within city files are unanimous motions by the Parks Commission – which were accepted by the city council – to prohibit any form of biking in Sunfish Lake Park.

III. Principles Governing the Development of Sunfish Lake Park

In the course of developing this vision for Sunfish Lake Park, the Parks Commission has been guided by a commitment to:

- maximizing utilization of the park without compromising, diminishing, or damaging the conservation of its natural resources or changing its fundamental character as a nature preserve;
- designing diverse uses that speak to the expressed preferences and anticipated needs of the people of Lake Elmo as iterated in the 2013 park survey while remaining true to the letter and spirit of the Land Grant easement of 2008; and,
- recognizing the unique role that the park plays as the only significant nature preserve in the city and instituting uses that draw on the natural characteristics of the park while, at the same time, complementing the design of the Lake Elmo parks system as a whole.

IV. Proposed Development and Management of the Park

A. Area One

1. Description

“Area One” consists of approximately 216 acres of rolling forest land, woodland, wetland, open water ponds, a small meadow, and a portion of Sunfish Lake itself.

2. Utilization

Consistent with the original intent of the park, and working within the parameters of the land trust easement of 2008, Area One should be used for only low-impact activities that do not detract from conservation of this unique natural resource. Quiet, unobtrusive activities such as nature hikes, guided interpretive walks, bird watching, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, landscape painting, jogging, orienteering, photography, geocaching and orienteering are some desirable uses. Activities that should be banned include biking, mountain biking (except on the road and parking lot), and the use of any motorized vehicles except those needed by city personnel and their designees for maintenance of trails and flora.

Commensurate with the role of Sunfish Lake Park as the ‘crown jewel’ of the Lake Elmo parks system, the Parks Commission recommends that the City develop new, long-term approaches to increasing the use of the park in ways that will continue to conserve its natural features. The delicate balance between using the park and conserving it can be achieved most effectively by restricting uses as iterated above while 1) developing new formal programming to draw people to the park, and 2) establishing new and sustainable strategic partnerships with a variety of organizations which may share an interest in the park:

- a) New and Enhanced Formal Programming. The City of Lake Elmo must go beyond the current, largely passive standing invitation to the people of Lake Elmo to take a

hike, go for a walk, or go snowshoeing in Sunfish Lake Park and develop formal programming that will actively draw people to the park. Some possible low-impact, City-organized programming could include:

- a. Annual festivals with entertainment and refreshments in the parking lot
 - b. Geocaching
 - c. Orienteering
 - d. Citizen science programming
 - e. Interpretive talks and hikes by experts
 - f. Ski races
 - g. Photo contests
 - h. Summer runs with refreshments
 - i. Snowshoe races with refreshments
- b) Strategic Partnerships. In the long-term, the City should reach out to a wide variety of organizations which may be interested in using Area One for their own needs. Possible partners could include the Audubon Society (organized bird watching events), District 834 Schools (science classes), local colleges and universities (science research), Boy/Girl Scouts of America (various uses), and regional arts and sciences museums. Collaborations with these groups should increase usage of Area One.

3. Management of the Natural Landscape

Long-term, the efficient and cost-effective management of Sunfish Lake Park will require the development of a master “Natural Resources/Woodland Stewardship Development Plan” that will guide the management of the park’s flora and fauna, and assure a smooth articulation of these natural resources with human-made trails, signage, and capital improvements. This plan should reflect the guiding principles contained in this document.

In addition to the Plan, the Parks Commission forwards these specific recommendations for managing the park:

- a) Storm Damage. The professionals who develop the Natural Resources Development Plan should include a set of response goals and procedures for responding quickly and effectively to storm damage in partnership with professional loggers and contract foresters. Contingencies for addressing significant storm damage should exist prior to incurring actual storm damage;

- b) Trails. The park's trails are to be maintained according to a well-established annual schedule, and the City should consult with professional naturalists on the best trail coverage and on ways to mitigate erosion. Winter ski trails are to be maintained regularly and according to a well-established protocol in order to encourage more people to use the trails for cross-country skiing. Winter trails for hikers and snowshoeing enthusiasts are to be established. In addition, in order to enhance accessibility, the City should install an eight-foot wide, multi-use asphalt trail near the parking lot for those with disabilities; ideally, this wide trail will run down to Sunfish Lake itself and, in the winter, serve as a gateway to ice skating on the lake. Boardwalks should be installed in key areas to enhance access throughout the park. Additional benches should be installed along the trail as a way of opening the park and its trails to those who may need extra assistance. Finally, the trails should be assessed regularly for erosion and problem areas should be dealt with immediately.
- c) Management of Invasive Species. The park should be monitored and inspected on a regular basis for the incursion of invasive flora and insects, and the City should develop a plan for mitigating invasive species using both professional and volunteer labor.
- d) Signage. The park is quite large, and there have been not infrequent cases of visitors getting disoriented on its looping trails. Existing signage is not adequate. The Parks Commission recommends that a better master overview sign and/or informational kiosk be installed at the parking lot along with maps and more signs at critical junctions along the trails. In addition, the City should develop, in collaboration with naturalists and perhaps the Audubon Society, signs at key places in the park that will provide interpretive information on the natural landscape and wildlife.
- e) Parking Lot. The parking lot that serves both Area One and Area Two should be paved as a way of encouraging greater use of the park.

4. Capital Improvements Area One

Given the nature of Area One, the Parks Commission envisions minimal capital improvements – mainly in the area of trails and signage.

A. Area Two

1. Description

“Area Two” consists of approximately 40 acres of rolling grasslands located immediately to the south of Area One. For several years, it was cultivated, but in 2011 the City planted prairie grasses and wildflowers in the area south and west of the parking lot.

2. Utilization

In general, the Parks Commission believes that the topography of Area Two allows for more active and diverse uses than are found in Area One. This area is envisioned as both a conserved prairie (in its pre-settlement state) and a gathering place for families. As in the case of Area One, though, utilization of this part of the park should be restricted to activities that will not diminish or damage the natural resources or conflict in any way with the long-term conservation of the area or violate the restrictions in place as part of the land trust easement. Where the focus in Area One is on upland forest and wetlands, the emphasis in Area Two is on restoration and maintenance of a long-grass prairie. Desirable uses of Area Two include:

- a. Hiking
- b. Running
- c. Snowshoeing
- d. Cross-country skiing
- e. Family picnics
- f. Nature observation
- g. Photography
- h. Landscape painting
- i. Playground
- j. Educational programming

3. Capital Improvements and Management of Area Two

In order to realize the full potential of Area Two, more significant capital improvements and non-capital improvements will be necessary:

- a. Expansion of the Tall-Grass Prairie. The existing prairie should be expanded approximately to the south and to the west as a way of moving towards a viable green corridor between Sunfish Lake Park and the Lake Elmo Park Reserve. The City should schedule regular burns as per the recommendation of the appropriate professionals.
- b. Trails. A new, but limited, system of paved trails should be constructed throughout the expanded tall-grass prairie. A system of boardwalks should connect the parking lot to the paved trails. Inasmuch as possible, trails should be designed for accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges. An overlook deck above the prairie with benches may enhance the enjoyment of the park by many individuals. Benches should be installed along the trails in order to help those needing extra assistance. The City should develop a plan for maintaining these trails.
- c. Nature Interpretive Center. The need for a "Nature Interpretive Center" should be studied for Area 2 whose intent it will be to provide environmental programming and nature experiences for all ages. This expands the vision which draws the community to the park through formal programming and strategic partnerships. It is proposed that the site will offer synergistic activities for the public and partner with area schools, boy and girl scout troops and local organizations. Active and enriched nature education classes are envisioned for preschool and grade school age children and assistance will be

given to help fulfill badge requirements for scout programs. Community educational programs that complement the “spirit” of the park as well as seasonal and holiday events would be held at the Center. The building design will complement and blend with the surrounding natural habitat, have a low profile, and have windows that will bring nature into the center. It will also have modern facilities (electricity, running water and flush toilets, if feasible) with a rustic exterior and a footprint at least large enough for a 30 seat classroom. The building would serve a dual function by providing shelter and toilets for the general public who visit the park. Any needed outside lighting will be minimal.

- d. Signage. Interpretive signage should be posted at key locations along the new prairie trails.
- e. Picnic Shelter. A picnic shelter with picnic tables should be constructed on the north edge of Area Two – on the edge of the parking lot.
- f. Playground. A playground that accommodates young children and teenagers should be installed near the picnic shelter using natural materials (such as those available through “Natural Playscapes”) that will fit well with the natural setting of the park.
- g. Overlook Tower or Platform. It would be appropriate for the City to install an overlook tower or platform in Area 2 (with the permission of the Land Trust).
- h. Safety. Owing to the isolation of Sunfish Lake Park and the risk of vandalism, security cameras should be installed that can monitor the parking lot, picnic shelter, and playground 24 hours a day.

V. Area Three

Area Three, an estimated xxx acres located directly to the west of Area One along Jamaca Avenue, presents some of the greatest challenges in terms of long-term strategic planning. It consists primarily of a very large and deep depression that was left as a result of the efforts by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to mitigate pollution in this area. There is some existing fencing in this area, as well as the only western entrance to Area One of Sunfish Lake Park.

The sense of the Parks Commission is that this area has significant potential as a city dog park, natural amphitheater, soccer and/or football fields, and perhaps baseball fields. The area is quite isolated, and most visitors to this parcel will likely arrive by car; unfortunately, there are few natural areas to place a parking lot with the possible exception of the area that runs along the northern fence line of Area Three and to the east of the existing fire station.

Given the challenges of this location and its unique topography, together with the fact that there has emerged no strong demand for the types of facilities and improvements that could be naturally accommodated in this area, the Parks Commission recommends that this area not be developed at this time – except for the planting of trees in areas along the edges of the large depression. This area should

be kept in reserve so that future community leaders will have a valuable resource to use as new priorities and needs emerge in the years to come. In the near future, it would be desirable to keep the area inside the large depression mowed as city resources are available so that the citizens of Lake Elmo can use it informally for pick-up games, walking their dogs, flying kites, etc. As land reserved for the future, and as an integral part of Sunfish Lake Park, Area Three should never be used for non-park purposes and should not be the site of non-park capital improvements.

Owing to the remedial actions taken by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to preserve the safety of Lake Elmo citizens, considerable acreage has been removed as use for parkland. Conversion of loss of this parkland should be pursued by the City in conjunction with appropriate legal and regulatory bodies.

