



## **STAFF REPORT**

DATE: 9/12/2017

**TO:** City Council

**FROM:** Emily Becker, City Planner

**AGENDA ITEM:** A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park

**REVIEWED BY:** Kristina Handt, City Administrator

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### **BACKGROUND:**

A Parks Commission subcommittee developed a long-term vision for the development of Sunfish Lake Park through the creation of the document entitled A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park (Guide). This Guide was presented to Council in June of 2015 but has not yet been officially adopted. The Minnesota Land Trust, to which a conservation easement was granted by the City over certain areas of the park, reviewed the document and made comments, and Staff prepared Minnesota Land Trust-recommended amendments to the plan for the Parks Commission's review. Language from the Sunfish Lake Park Area 2 Concept Plan approved by the MN Land Trust in 2009 was incorporated in to the Guide to maintain consistency. The Parks Commission recommended approval of the revised Guide at its November 2016 meeting.

### **ISSUE BEFORE COUNCIL:**

The Council is respectfully being requested to review and approve A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park.

### **PROPOSAL DETAILS/ANALYSIS:**

The plan addresses three different areas in the park, as shown in the attachment Exhibit B: Property Map. The Guide gives a description of each of these areas and outlines utilization and recommended capital improvements.

### **FISCAL IMPACT:**

The capital improvements would be worked in to the Parks Capital Improvement Plan and evaluated and prioritized like any other park capital improvement on an annual basis.

### **OPTIONS:**

The Council may:

- Adopt Resolution 2017-087, approving A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park as presented.
- Amend A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park and adopt the Guide as amended.
- Do not adopt Resolution 2017-087.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff and the Parks Commission respectfully request, as part of tonight's consent agenda, Council adopt Resolution 2017-087, approving A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park as presented. If removed from the Consent Agenda, the recommended action can be completed through the following motion:

***“Move to adopt Resolution 2017-087, approving A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park as presented.”***

**ATTACHMENTS:**

- 1) A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park
- 2) Resolution 2017-087

# **A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park**

A Proposal of the Lake Elmo Parks Commission

Updated November 2016

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## **I. Purpose**

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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.

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## **II. A History of Sunfish Lake Park**

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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 conservation 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.

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### **III. Principles Governing the Development of Sunfish Lake Park**

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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 Conservation Easement recorded 9/22/2009 and held by the Minnesota Land Trust; 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.

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### **IV. Proposed Development and Management of the Park**

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#### **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 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. All forest and habitat management plans for property protected by conservation easement must be approved in writing by the Minnesota Land Trust. Removal of timber and other wood products as well as management of the vegetation on property protected by conservation easement must be in accordance with the approved plan.

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. Further research will need to be done on American with Disabilities Act requirements for trails within Area 1 of the park, as paved trails are only allowed as necessary to meet such requirements and must receive written approval from the Land Trust. 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.

#### **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. Short Turf - Open Play Area
- 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. Prairie / Oak Savanna Restoration Area  
Most of area 2 is slated for restoration to prairie and oak savanna. Care will be taken to research the area’s likely pre-settlement plant community with the goal of restoring the site to replicate the original genetics as closely as possible. A seed mix will be used that is comprised of the species that are believed to be native to the site. The seed will originate from the same ecoregion or in counties that adjoin this ecoregion. The installation of the restoration project and subsequent management will be based on sound and well-found ecological principles. Efforts will initially be made to restore the area to prairie with the possibility of creating areas of savanna.
- b. Native Planting / Interpretive Area  
The long drive into the park will be planted with plants native to the site, but in a more structured or “clustered” fashion. The goals of this somewhat more formal planting arrangement is 1) to create a defined and “showy” entrance to the park and 2) to

provide effective interpretation of the various plant types.

- c. Trails. A segment of ADA compliant hard surface trail is desired with the goal of providing a high quality interpretive experience with as much diversity as possible. A soft-surfaced mowed trail might be established throughout the perimeter of area 2 with a couple of cross-over trails designed to offer a variety of loop trail distances. Trail placement should be done with the goal of providing an effective fire break and catching as much diversity as possible while offering gentle curves for interest. Interpretive signage might be developed as a means of offering a high quality self-guided interpretive experience.
- d. Nature Interpretive Center. Approximately 1.5 acres in the northeast corner of area 2 is identified as space in which a modest interpretive center might be placed. The goal of the center would be to provide a facility that would promote awareness, appreciation and conservation of the park's natural resources through interpretation, educational programs, activities and events. The facility might include a small indoor multi-purpose area that would be used as a gathering space or warming area in inclement or cold weather and restrooms and/or an adjacent outdoor gathering space with some overhead protection from the elements. The outdoor areas adjacent to the center would be utilized for interpretation and interactive learning opportunities. Placement of the center within the identified 1.5 acre parcel would be based on the desire for the facility to "hug" the land in a complimentary and unobtrusive fashion. The placement and design of the center should be guided by the desire for visitors to effectively observe and experience the diversity of the natural outdoor surroundings while within and just outside the facility. The structure should be rustic in nature and constructed / fabricated with materials, textures and colors that will effectively blend with the natural surroundings. The design and construction of the center should be based on sound environmental and conservation principles with the possible use of geothermal, solar, and wind for energy. The design should also reflect the city's heritage and rural character.
- e. Picnic/Short Turf - Open Play Area. A open play area that accommodates young children and teenagers should be made available near the picnic shelter. Natural materials that will fit well with the natural setting of the park and with written approval of the Minnesota Land Trust could be included in this area.
- f. Signage. Interpretive signage should be posted at key locations along the new prairie trails.
- 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.
- i. Parking Lot. The parking area will include structures and amenities that will assist in the effective management of the parking area and entire park. For example, rain gardens will be installed to filter run-off from the parking area and improve water quality. An information kiosk with regulatory, directional and interpretive information will be located in the area with the goal of enhancing park visitor's experience and promoting conservation. The parking area will be defined through the placement of stones or other natural materials in an effort to prohibit unauthorized vehicles from entering other areas of the park. The size and shape of the parking area will be guided by needs. All structures and amenities will be rustic in nature and constructed / fabricated with materials, textures and colors that will effectively blend with the natural surroundings. The parking area should be as natural as possible.
- j. Bike Rack. A bike rack should be installed near the parking lot area in order to allow users to bike to the park and continue on foot on to the trails or nature interpretive center.

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## **V. Area Three**

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Area Three, 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.

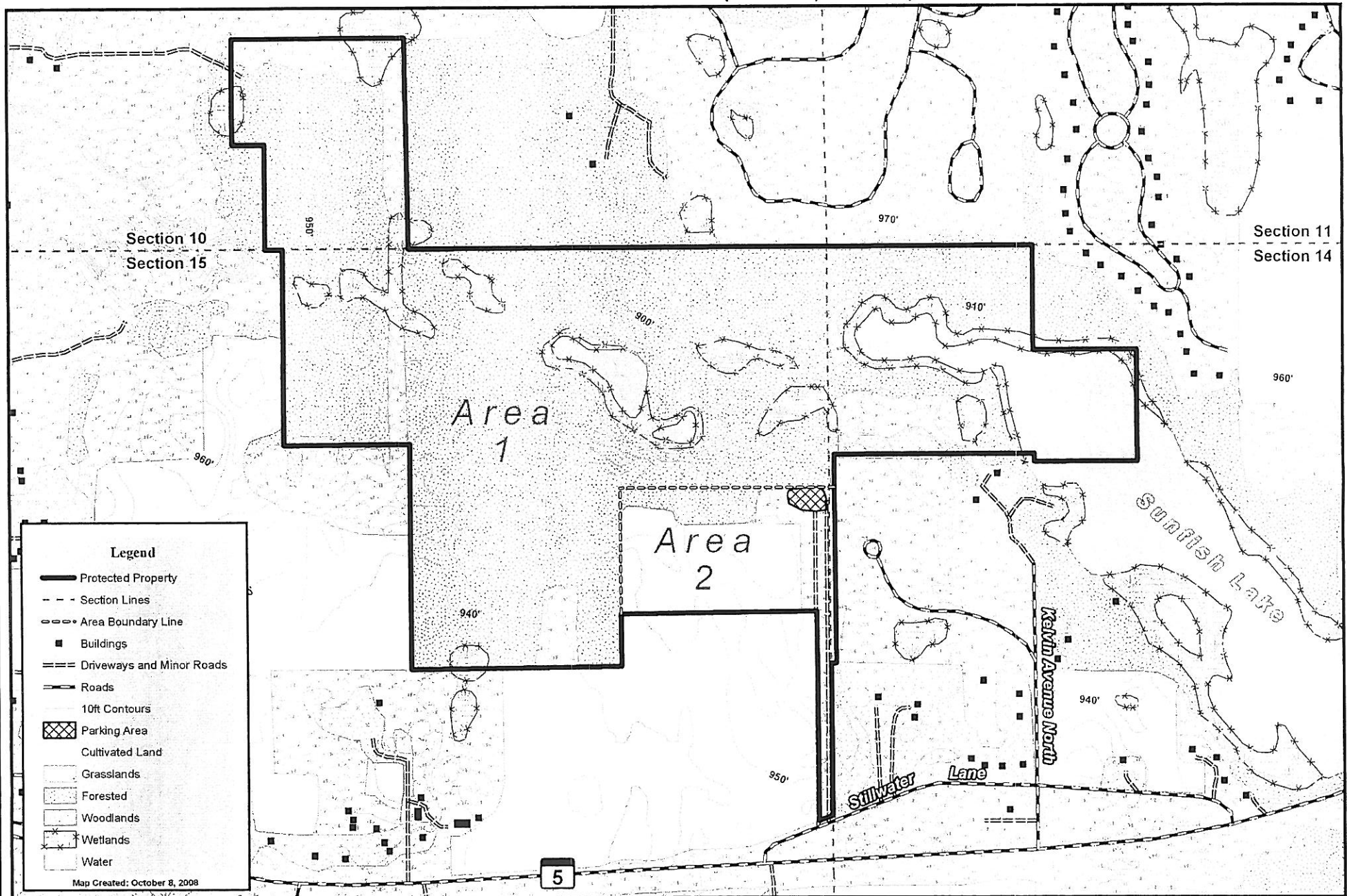
The sense of the Parks Commission is that this area has significant potential as a city dog park, natural amphitheater, soccer and/or football fields, and perhaps baseball fields. The area is quite isolated, and most visitors to this parcel will likely arrive by car; unfortunately, there are few natural 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.

# Exhibit B: Property Map



## Map Resource Information

Protected Property, Section Lines, Area Boundary Line, Buildings, Roads, Driveways & Minor Roads, 10-Foot Contours, Parking Area, Cultivated Land, Grasslands, Forests, Woodlands, Wetlands, and Water created by Community GIS Services Inc.

Users of this map agree and acknowledge that Community GIS Services Inc. and the Minnesota Land Trust cannot be held liable for accuracy of GIS material provided. GIS materials should not be relied upon to establish legal title, boundary lines, or locations of improvements.



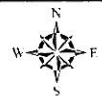
Site: Sunfish Park - Tract: City of Lake Elmo

Washington County - Twp. 29 N Rng. 21 W Sec. 10, 14 & 15



Scale:  
1" = 800'

800 400 0 800 Feet



**CITY OF LAKE ELMO  
WASHINGTON COUNTY  
STATE OF MINNESOTA**

**RESOLUTION NO. 2017-087**

**A RESOLUTION APPROVING A GUIDE TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND  
USAGE OF SUNFISH LAKE PARK**

WHEREAS, Sunfish Lake Park (“Park”) is the largest park in the Lake Elmo park system, with a total of 256 acres; and

WHEREAS, a subcommittee of the Parks Commission developed a long-term vision for the development of Sunfish Lake Park that can serve as a blueprint to City leaders through 2030 entitled A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park (“Guide”); and

WHEREAS, the Minnesota Land Trust, which holds a conservation easement over areas of Sunfish Lake Park, has reviewed and approved the Guide; and

WHEREAS, the Guide outlines the history, principles governing the development, and proposed development and management of areas of the Park; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the City Council of the City of Lake Elmo, Minnesota, does hereby approve A Guide to the Development and Usage of Sunfish Lake Park.

APPROVED by the Lake Elmo City Council on this 15<sup>th</sup> day of August, 2017.

By: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mike Pearson  
Mayor

ATTEST:

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Julie Johnson  
City Clerk