

December 9, 2021

South Bend Board of Park Commissioners  
219 South St. Louis Blvd.  
South Bend, IN 46617

Dear Commissioners,

In March, when I presented the first 2021 report of the Ecological Advocacy Committee, I mentioned that the EAC will sunset at the end of the year. At that time, I encouraged dialogue that would hopefully strengthen the resolution and the committee. When I presented again in July, I reminded the commission of the sunset. I again suggested that the commission, staff, and EAC analyze the pros and cons of the current resolution and work towards improving it.

At the August park board meeting, I was surprised when VPA staff presented a draft resolution to extend the EAC. To the best of my knowledge, this resolution came without any input from the EAC. The only apparent changes were (1) extending the terms of the members from one to two years and (2) setting a term limit of the chair at two consecutive two-year terms. From my recollection, Amy Rousch, who presented the resolution, explained to the commissioners that the term limit would not be retroactive. Instead, the "clock" would start at the beginning of the 2022 EAC cycle. When asked my opinion, I responded with my concerns over the lack of definition of the EAC's role with the citizen's tree board, and the commissioners tabled the resolution.

I could not attend in person, but I was present virtually for the October park board meeting when Matthew Moyers re-presented the resolution. Although he seemed to acknowledge my forestry concerns, no conversations about improving the resolution occurred between VPA staff and EAC.

My concerns over improving the resolution extend beyond forestry. Some of the matters that I would have liked to have hashed out include:

- The EAC member selection process. Initially, the park board created the EAC based on the recommendation by the Common Council as a means of citizen oversight. Is it a wise practice to have the overseen agency appointing its overseers?
- Removal of inactive members. In some years, EAC members have missed numerous meetings, and on a few occasions, the committee was unable to field a quorum. I would have liked to have seen the resolution updated to include a means of automatically removing inactive members. Oddly enough, at the December 2021 EAC meeting, VPA Liaison Garry Harrington informed the committee that member John Ditillo was not allowed to return because the "rule" is that missing three meetings results in expulsion. I know of no such rule.

- Student membership. At the October EAC meeting, Mr. Moyers explained that there in provisions in the committee for "student membership" with a term of one year instead of two years. Should this be included in the resolution?
- At the October meeting, Mr. Harrington expressed frustration in the lack of definition of the role of the VPA liaison. In essence, he is unclear about his duties. For that matter, the resolution does not mention VPA staff at all. Instead, it defines the EAC as an advisory committee to the Park Board. However, VPA staff have assumed the role of selecting the members, setting the committee's agenda and meeting dates, and choosing the "of counsel" members. Should this be better clarified?
- To address the matter of erratic minutes, in 2021, the EAC created a somewhat unofficial but much needed Secretary position. In my opinion, the resolution should specify the election of both Committee Chair and Secretary.

## **EAC Business**

### **River Windows**

River windows are areas along the St. Joseph river intentionally cleared of view-blocking vegetation to provide scenic vistas for humans. Several years ago, City Forester Brent Thompson supplied the EAC maps and photos of 16 river window locations. The department's guidelines state that they "clear only small scrub brush, invasive woody plants and unhealthy trees."

The 2021 Natural Resources Management Plan calls for a River Windows Best Management Practice Document, and it has been on the committee's shortlist of tasks. However, VPA staff informed the committee that their number one ecological priority for 2021 was to create a Canada Goose management plan.

On May 19, EAC member Emily Alderton reported seeing "extensive tree clearance along Riverside Drive" and questioned the wisdom of conducting such work during bird nesting season. The EAC voiced our concerns to Facilities & Grounds staff, who agreed to postpone the work until after nesting season. However, Mr. Thompson indicated that the department had greatly expanded the river vista concept and that he had orders to "make the river look like Kernan Park all the way up."

In early October, as the work began again, I spoke with two individual citizens concerned about the extent of the vegetation clearing. Ms. Alderton confirmed, "they have caused an enormous amount of disturbance, right down to the waters edge. I'll take some photos today. I was most concerned about the obvious bare ground and erosion issues, as well as the destruction of habitat. These aren't so much "river windows" as they have opened up the entire length of river bank, causing disturbance right along Riverside Drive."

Over the course of several meetings, the EAC had conversations with VPA staff over the reasons and the methods such widespread clearing. Ultimately, the EAC could not reach a consensus

recommendation to the Park Board, but the following is a summation of the committee's concerns:

- The perceived necessity of opening up large sections of the river, which has virtually no ecological benefit and numerous drawbacks, including:
  - Potential for increased erosion, streambank destabilization, and sedimentary contamination of the river
  - Increased resident Canada Goose habitat
  - Destruction of shrub habitat that is utilized by wildlife, especially breeding birds
- Indiscriminate cutting — Plants are being removed based on trunk diameter instead of species.
- Work performed using heavy machinery, resulting in soil compaction and disturbance, and damage to infrastructure.
- Public safety — Areas along Riverside Drive no longer have safety barriers between pedestrian trail and river.
- The staff has not provided EAC clarity of what constitutes a river view. What is the maximum allowable height of understory species?
- EAC has not seen any plans for replanting
- The maintenance plan will apparently call for an annual mowing of the riparian area. Doing so will eliminate both desirable and undesirable woody species.
- Virtually no public disclosure or input into the project
- Disregard for ecological standards outlined in the 2021 Natural Resources Management Plan
- There are currently no plans to remove the mature, seed-producing invasive trees left in place by the project.

### **Wildlife Coexistence Plan**

The most extensive matter of EAC business in 2021 was the creation of Volume One of a comprehensive Wildlife Coexistence Plan. The majority of Volume One deals with Canada Geese with the intention that Volume Two will address other native animals that occasionally have real or perceived conflicts with humans in South Bend Park properties. Contributing were four EAC members, one VPA staff member, two regional experts, and one nationally known naturalist, historian, author.

The EAC voted to accept the draft of the Wildlife Coexistence Plan, and we handed it off to VPA staff for further stakeholder vetting. At the December EAC meeting, Mr. Moyers indicated that the department would "treat the plan like a white paper" in creating their own plan.

### **Citizen's Tree Board**

Following communication gaffes this year over several urban forestry projects, and prior to the renewal of the EAC resolution, I suggested that the committee look closer into best practices for

citizen tree boards. In October, I met with Indiana DNR Urban Forestry Coordinator Carrie Tauscher, who gave me nine copies of the National Arbor Day Foundation's Tree Board Handbook. I subsequently booked Ms. Tauscher to present to the EAC at the December meeting, but following the renewal of the ordinance, I canceled with her. Subsequently, Mr. Moyers recently explained to the EAC that he would prefer to address the citizen's tree board in Chapter 19 of South Bend Municipal Code.

### **Seitz Park Plantings**

Following the December meeting, the EAC received copies of the proposed planting list for Seitz Park. Of the 20 proposed species, 16 are not native to North America. Committee member Schabel commented, "Native plants should be used, not Japanese spiraea, catmint, and hybrid Asian elms. Is there a good reason, other than simply not caring, that VPA is making such poor decisions on this? VPA has shown that it can do landscaping with natives, when it wants to, so this regression to such bad choices is puzzling."

## **Park Matters Involving EAC Members Outside of EAC Business**

### **Howard Park Bioswales**

Last winter, under EAC member Professor Andy Schnabel's lead, the Indiana University South Bend Botany Club purchased native plant seed and grew approximately 1000 plants for use at Howard Park. On June 25, four EAC members (and family), IUSB students, and Americorps volunteers transplanted over 500 of them. Round two of the planting took place on October 31. Contributing to this effort were two EAC members, IUSB students past and present, members of the community, and the South Bend Chapter of the Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes organization.

At this point, aside from yearly mowing, I don't believe that anyone is actively stewarding the native plantings at the city's signature park. Although volunteer labor and community buy-in are valuable, in my opinion, relying on volunteers alone is not a wise long-term strategy for this property.

### **Ponader Park**

On the evening of August 6, following heavy rainfall, I made a trip to Ponader Park to find the construction zone had trapped hundreds of fish from the overflowing creek. By the time I arrived, the fish still living were trapped in rapidly drying puddles. I proceeded to procure a 5-gallon bucket from Home Depot and spent the next 90 minutes transporting dozens of fish back into the creek. The next day, I reported the incident to VPA staff and to the Division of Fish and Wildlife at the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

## **Woodlawn Park**

On October 22, I co-organized and hosted a first-of-its-kind, all-day workshop with Indiana University South Bend faculty. We began the day at Pinhook Park, where I presented to the faculty some of the ecological challenges of South Bend parks and some of our recent initiatives. We then spent several hours at Woodlawn Park removing invasive bush honeysuckle (*Lonicera* spp.) and wintercreeper vine (*Euonymus fortunei*). Following a break for lunch, guest naturalist Amanda Smith, Superintendent of Natural Resources and Education for Hamilton County Parks, and I led an interpretive tour of the new Pinhook native tree trail. We then returned to Woodlawn for two more hours of invasive removal.

Over 20 IUSB staff members, including Chancellor Elrod, attended the event, and the feedback evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. I believe there are numerous untapped opportunities to partner with local organizations to increase the feeling of ownership in their local parks. Although Hannah Teska was very accommodating and gracious in allowing us to use the Pinhook Community Center, and Amy Roush supplied gloves, shovels, and loppers, it would be to VPA's advantage to better recognize and promote these groups of hard-working volunteers.

## **Species Inventories**

As I mentioned in the July report, in 2021, I began several initiatives to create baseline inventories of the plants and animals that call South Bend park properties home. The surveys include: calling frogs (conducted three times in the spring and summer, breeding bird point counts, breeding bird atlas, and botanical inventories. Theoretically, these will be ongoing studies conducted every year to track trends, monitor sensitive species and the results of restoration work, and catch invasive plant infestations while they are still manageable.

Some of the survey highlights are as follows:

Breeding Bird Point Counts: 49 parks surveyed. The parks with the highest number of bird species were:

1. Elbel (21)
2. Rum Village (17)
3. Keller (13)
4. Pinhook (12)
5. Leeper (10)

The parks with the lowest number of bird species were:

1. Gov. Joe Kernan (2)
2. Kelly (2)
3. Randolph (2)
4. Voorde (2)
5. Helman (1)

Amazingly, the Martin Luther King Center came in at number six with nine species.

The Breeding Bird Atlas resulted in 54 species of birds overall, of which,

- Confirmed breeding in South Bend Parks — 7
- Probably breeding in South Bend Parks — 13
- Possibly breeding in South Bend Parks — 26 species
- Observed in South Bend Parks, but not considered breeding there — 6

### Botanical Inventories

I surveyed 26 parks in 2021. This will be another ongoing inventory as I certainly missed many things, but the preliminary data is as follows:

Most species:

1. Rum Village (105)
2. Ponader (92)
3. 35th Street Wetlands (81)
4. Pinhook (78)
5. Rum Village Annex (60)

Least species:

1. LaSalle Landing (20)
2. Voorde (14)
3. Martin Luther King Center (12)
4. Walker Field (11)
5. Gov. Joe Kernan (10)

Parks with the highest Floristic Quality Assessment (FQA):

1. LaSalle Landing (4.2)
2. Rum Village Annex (4.13)
3. Rum Village (3.78)
4. Potawatomi (3.43)
5. O'Brien (2.74)

Parks with the lowest Floristic Quality Assessment (FQA):

1. Pulaski (.65)
2. Plaza (.61)
3. Keller (.58)
4. Brownfield (.56)
5. Walker Field (.55)

Parks with the highest Floristic Quality Index (FQI):

1. Rum Village (38.74)

2. Rum Village Annex (32.02)
3. Pinhook (20.27)
4. LaSalle Landing (18.78)
5. O'Brien (17.99)

Parks with the lowest Floristic Quality Index (FQI):

1. Keller (3.64)
2. Brownfield (3.26)
3. Plaza (2.92)
4. Gov. Joe Kernan (2.53)
5. Walker Field (1.81)

It's important to note that the current botanical inventories include only about half of South Bend Parks. There are many notable exceptions, including Elbel. Although Orbis Consulting thoroughly surveyed Elbel and Mud Lake in 2016, they spent much of their time in the wetlands outside of park boundaries. Additionally, they avoided much of the golf course and other anthropogenic areas, so an updated inventory is needed.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Before last Monday's EAC meeting, I was under the impression that I was not "termed out" as EAC chair. However, near the end of the meeting, Mr. Moyers mentioned that he wanted to "whisper in people's ears" about taking on the chair position, which led me to believe that I am no longer eligible to serve. On Tuesday, I emailed VPA staff for clarification, but I received no reply. Therefore, if this is my last report to you, I will end with some final thoughts and recommendations.

1. Strive to improve communications both internally within VPA and externally with the EAC. Over the past five years, I've seen many instances where better communication could have warded off problems. Often, the EAC has learned about projects affecting ecology only after being finalized. Examples include the species selections for Howard Park and the current river clearing project.
2. Encourage the EAC to be more forthcoming. I constantly remind the committee that the EAC was created based on a recommendation by the Common Council to provide some citizen oversight. It seems easy for members to forget that first and foremost, they're not just "VPA's helpers," but rather serve an essential role as advisors to the Board of Park Commissioners.
3. Continue to foster community building and ownership of South Bend's parks. I've witnessed community enthusiasm firsthand through projects like the Howard Park plantings and the IUSB faculty day. A family who helped plant at Howard Park stated

that they would come back years later and remind their children that they helped build this. In a post-event survey among IUSB faculty, 92% chose that they "strongly agreed," and 8% chose that they "agreed" with the statement "I want to participate in a similar park clean-up in the future." From my experience, even as a non-staff member, rolling up my sleeves and getting dirty alongside the community goes a long way in building a community of people who care about our public spaces.

4. Think like it's 2021. When South Bend's first established our park system, it was a very different world. Wild spaces surrounded the city. We didn't worry about things like local extinctions or invasive species. We designed our city parks primarily around recreational activities.

Things are different in the 21st century. Many people are in tune with native plant landscaping, coexisting with and not eradicating wildlife, and the value of having quiet natural places to enjoy. Many South Bends parks can benefit from adding simple features such as rain gardens, no-mow areas, and pollinator gardens. By sparing the mower, we can spoil the wildlife.

5. South Bend can continue to lead the way if we want it. Four years ago, I stood at the podium at the O'Brien Center and proclaimed that South Bend would lead the way in Indiana ecology and that other cities would look to us for guidance. Since then, we passed the most progressive vegetation ordinance in the state, and we created a comprehensive and noteworthy natural resources management plan. Since then, I've received calls and messages almost weekly from around the state asking for advice and requesting speaking engagements. A lot of people want to pattern South Bend's ecological leadership.

Thank you, commissioners, for allowing me to serve the City of South Bend. It has been an honor and a privilege to work alongside you all to make South Bend a better place.

Yours in service,

Steve Sass  
Ecological Advocacy Committee  
2021 Chair