

The Community We Could Become: Elbel Park as a Nature Preserve

This white paper provides context and information for those interested in the future of Elbel Park. At 313 acres, Elbel is South Bend's biggest park; the next largest park in the South Bend system, Rum Village, is half the size of Elbel. Elbel Park features Mud Lake, the South Bend area's largest body of water, as well as forests, wetlands, and meadows. Because of its natural beauty, decades ago Elbel was considered as an alternate candidate for a state park. More than a golf course, Elbel supports hiking, running, sledding, snowshoeing, bird watching, and cross country skiing by South Bend residents.

Currently, the city is in the process of preparing Elbel for possible sale. This white paper argues that the following actions will best serve the South Bend community:

- 1) To preserve public access to Elbel Park in perpetuity with a land trust partnership
- 2) To achieve goals of the *Five Year South Bend Parks Master Plan*
- 3) To provide funding to address park budget shortfalls and to end losses from golf operations
- 4) To connect children to our unique local ecology
- 5) To enhance the economic development of our region with a premier nature preserve

To preserve public access to Elbel Park in perpetuity with a land trust partnership

City communities receive vitality from many sources, including schools, neighborhoods, urban centers, businesses, non-profits, and parks. With the latter, South Bend is in danger of falling far behind both national standards and Midwestern peer cities regarding access to park land. According to figures from The Trust for Public Land, American 'low-density' cities, a category of cities structured like South Bend, have a median 14.8 acres of public park land per 1,000 residents. (The Trust for Public Land, *2015 City Parks Facts Report: Parklands, Density Appendix*, accessible at <http://www.tpl.org/2015-city-park-facts>) If Blackthorn (180 acres), Erskine (120 acres), and Elbel (313 acres) have public access eliminated by sale to private, for-profit owners, as has been proposed, South Bend's 101,168 residents (per 2010 Census) would see the 1530 acres of park land held in their name in 2014 reduced to 917 acres by 2016, resulting in 9.05 acres per 1,000 residents.

Using a different metric, considering the simple number of residents per park acre in Midwestern cities, St. Louis, MO, has 86 residents per park acre, Indianapolis, IN, 72, Madison, WI, 44, Cincinnati, OH, 39, and Akron, OH, has 24 residents per park acre. (Compiled from statistics of The Trust for Public Land, *2015 City Parks Facts Report*, accessible at <http://www.tpl.org/2015-city-park-facts> pp. 1-8). If Blackthorn, Elbel, and Erskine are all alienated from public access by sale, in two years South Bend would nearly double its number of residents per park acre, moving from 66 residents per park acre to 110.

Sale of Elbel to a private developer or golf-course operator would create in South Bend a deficiency of natural areas, relative to cities regionally and nationally. A path forward is needed

that preserves public access to Elbel's natural beauty and ecologically important lands and waters, while addressing the significant problems that have prompted the potential sale of the city's golf courses. Indeed, this problem is structural, indicating a lack of development in support of our local ecology by governmental organizations and by non-profits.

One finds few resources for environmental stewardship and education in our area. Beyond the governmental level, South Bend has a relatively inactive non-profit sector to sustain freely accessible parks and natural preserves. Out of 92 Indiana counties, St. Joseph County is one of just three without an operating land trust for nature conservation. The very successful "Give Local St. Joseph County" fundraiser of the Community Foundation raised over 6.7 million dollars for fifty-two non-profits in our area on May 5th, 2015, but less than 1% went to the only local non-profit, The St. Joseph County Parks Foundation, with nature conservation as a focus. The Nature Conservancy, Indiana's largest non-profit conservation organization, does not have a project site within 40 miles of South Bend. And no South Bend entity has yet made a successful application for the 2016 Bicentennial Nature Trust funds, a \$30 million dollar public-private partnership to acquire new lands for conservation.

In view of this complex situation, a partnership with a non-profit land trust with experience in the protection and restoration of natural areas may be wise. Such a partnership could contractually establish perpetual public access to the land, provide a purchase price to defray projected budget shortfalls in the South Bend Parks' near future, end the financial losses borne by taxpayers from Elbel's golf operations, and develop non-profit organizational capacity in the local area to acquire and maintain new preserves and parks. This partnership could also enable South Bend Parks to achieve many of the stated goals in its Master Plan, including the

development of environmental education for school children, the promotion of health and wellness, and the preservation of the assets entrusted to the city.

A candidate for such a partnership could be the Shirley Heinze Land Trust (Shirley Heinze), which has decades of experience in acquiring, restoring, and preserving natural areas in three northern Indiana counties: LaPorte, Porter, and Lake. Please see the attachment at the end of this white paper for more information on this possible partner.

To achieve goals of the *Five Year South Bend Parks Master Plan*

Recently the South Bend Parks Department developed and published a comprehensive vision for the future of South Bend parks, called the *Five Year South Bend Parks Master Plan* (SBPMP). This plan describes the goals of the Parks Department, its financial reality, and the perspectives of national experts and local citizens regarding the best paths forward in the coming years. Among the goals articulated in this plan are “*To Maintain, Utilize, and Preserve the Resources Entrusted to Us For the Public Good*”, “*To Strengthen the Ethic of Environmental Stewardship*”, to “*Promote Health and Wellness*”, and to “*Forge Community Partnerships*”. (SBPMP, p. 118) The value of the proposed partnership with a land trust is best understood in reference to these goals.

Elbel is a **unique and special public resource** with a history of significant investment by South Bend citizens. Elbel Park is named for Richard Elbel, a South Bend Parks Board member from 1910-1937. The park was purchased and developed at the cost of \$550,000 from 1961-1965, an outlay equivalent to \$4.1 million dollars today. Elbel Park is South Bend’s biggest city

park, with 313 acres that host the South Bend area's largest body of water, Mud Lake, and a beautiful landscape of wetlands, mature hardwood forests, and rolling hills. Simply put, there is no other park in the South Bend park system like it. It is highly unlikely that the South Bend Parks Department, owing to limited financial capacity and heavy development in the areas surrounding South Bend, could in the future purchase a park like Elbel to serve the public good.

Because of its unique ecological identity, size, and beauty, Elbel offers a special opportunity to strengthen the **ethic of environmental stewardship** in South Bend. No other city park has the views, the space, the habitats, and proximity to South Bend schools and organizations as Elbel. Land trusts often partner with local schools to provide environmental education. Such a partnership could provide South Bend children, parents, and teachers access to Elbel's wetlands, forests, and many species, which specially characterize our local environment. Though Elbel already hosts deer, red tailed hawks, Great Blue Herons and migrating Sandhill Cranes, the many-year project to restore Elbel's landscape, and to eliminate the pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and non-native species currently in use by the golf course, would undoubtedly and dramatically increase the diversity of flora and fauna at the park, providing an unparalleled opportunity for South Bend youth to see and learn firsthand the difference environmental science can make when applied to the protection and restoration of natural areas.

A protected and restored Elbel would also provide great opportunities for the **health and wellness** of the South Bend community. Land trusts serve to provide the public access to natural areas for many purposes. For example, Shirley Heinze's thousands of acres of land held in trust in Northern Indiana for the public offer hiking, trail running, bird watching, cross

country skiing, dog walking, photography, nature study, and many other forms of recreation. During limited times and conditions, fishing and hunting are possible in some areas. These activities, and the availability of beautiful, open natural spaces, yield many of benefits the Master Plan describes as unique to great parks: better physical and psychological health, stronger neighborhoods and communities, and better air and water quality. (SBPMP, 108)

An alliance with a land trust to protect, restore, and preserve Elbel would **forge a community partnership** that would obviously benefit citizens, the South Bend Parks Department, and our local environment. As the Master Plan notes, "Strategic partnerships with both the public and private sector are essential to maximize the potential of the facilities and programs offered to the community." (SBPMP, 122) Given the lack of organization and development in St. Joseph County's non-profit sector regarding natural preservation noted above, this proposed partnership with a land trust promises to address an obvious need in our community now, with the potential to grow in beneficial ways in the future.

To provide funding to address park budget shortfalls and end losses from golf operations

In part, this need for partnership originates from the financially tenuous future of South Bend Parks: "The SBPRD is doing the most it can to maintain and improve existing parks. However, the Department's current and projected budget is not sufficient to maintain and improve current parks and facilities to the level needed to meet community needs." (SBPMP, 122) Unlike proposals to continue the public provision of golf at Elbel, or to eliminate public

access to Elbel entirely via sale to a private developer or golf course operator, the proposal to partner with a land trust would alone retain public access to Elbel, provide funds to address the Parks Department's projected budget shortfall, and end the financial losses charged to taxpayers by Golf Operations at the park.

In certain cases, the sale of a public park to a private, for-profit entity could result in greater tax revenue for the municipality, thus providing more money for parks. It is important to note that this is not the case with Elbel, as the park is sited just outside South Bend's city limits. Private development of Elbel would not result in direct tax payments to South Bend.

The South Bend Parks Master Plan uses "The Pyramid Methodology", a schema in use by park agencies across the country, to categorize recreation types according to purpose and budget goals. In this schema Golf is categorized as a "Level 4" activity that provides "Considerable Individual Benefit". It describes this class of activity as ideally requiring "No Subsidy" and a "Full Recovery" of all costs associated with its provision to the public, on account of its primarily individual benefit. (SBPMP, p.107, Table 18) However, Golf Operations of the City of South Bend have lost a considerable amount of money in recent years. The *South Bend Tribune* reported losses of \$488,861 between 2010 and 2013 at the city courses of Elbel, Erskine, and Studebaker. In this period, only Studebaker enjoyed a profitable year, earning \$2,000 in 2011. ("Golfers Concerned" *South Bend Tribune*, 8/19/15) In addition to ongoing yearly losses, the Master Plan describes capital expenses of several million dollars as necessary to simply maintain golf facilities in South Bend between 2014 to 2019. (SBPMP, 163-8)

According to *The Economist*, declining course revenue and golf course closures are symptoms of an overall decline in interest and participation in the sport: in 2006, 30 million

Americans played golf; by 2013, this number had dropped to 25 million. 2013 represented the 8th consecutive year of net golf course closures nationally. ("Why Golf is in Decline in America" *The Economist*, 4/2/15) Locally, golf club owners speculate that South Bend will require a reduction in courses to shore up the South Bend golf market. As Tim Firestone, an owner of Blackthorn Golf Course, stated to the *South Bend Tribune*, "We have too many golf courses with the number of population that we have...we either need population growth or for courses to go away." ("Golf is On" *South Bend Tribune*, 5/24/15)

Unlike golf, which requires substantial individual investments to purchase golf clubs, balls, bags, greens fees, and other paraphernalia, and which is not accessible by certain age groups, many of the activities supported by a restored and preserved Elbel Park would be accessible by all South Bend citizens, regardless of income level or age. The proposed conversion of Elbel to a nature preserve would provide in perpetuity many activities the Master Plan describes as foundational, Level I and Level II benefits: **Open Space and Trails, Open Recreation, After School Programs**. Owing to their broad appeal and community building power, these benefits are associated with a budget goal of "Full Subsidy" or "Majority Subsidy" from parks' budgets. (SBPMP, 107, Table 18) Yet the plan to preserve Elbel as a non-profit nature trust would not require ongoing annual outlays or regular capital investments from the South Bend Parks Department, thus providing tremendous benefits to the community with no cost to taxpayers.

To connect children to our unique local ecology

Before it was known as the Crossroads of America for its many highways, Indiana was an ecological crossroads, with the most important natural byways located in Northern Indiana. Here eastern hardwood forests met western prairie lands, while the dunes and waters of Lake Michigan came near the Great Kankakee Marsh of Indiana's northwest, one of the largest freshwater wetlands in the world. South Bend was settled by European immigrants as the shortest land bridge across the Continental Divide between the Great Lakes and Mississippi waterways, represented by the St. Joseph and Kankakee Rivers, respectively, both of which flow through South Bend.

Today most South Bend citizens are unaware that the city has two rivers, that a million acre paradise that hosted millions of migrating birds once grew out of the waters of its West Side, that several globally rare habitats exist in and around the city's limits. Sheer diversity is the special characteristic of our local ecology, yet this diversity has very few places locally in which it can be seen, studied, and loved.

As citizens of South Bend in its 150th year, we owe the pioneers of our past and the residents of our future the protection of the natural beauty that we have received. We can expect our children to love and cherish a land that they know. Protecting and making accessible the wild diversity of our land is of paramount importance to the education of our children, together with provision of nearby parks in which to explore, study, contemplate, and enjoy nature.

To enhance the economic development of our region with a premier natural preserve

The South Bend Parks Master Plan details the many economic benefits that accrue to a community which invests in nature and parks. Given the extensive treatment of the relationship of parks to the local economy in the SBPMP, only a summary will be given here. Parks and open spaces are associated with higher commercial and residential property values and thus higher tax revenues, increased tourism, lower health care costs, lower crime rates, improved air and water quality, better erosion and storm water control, and a higher perceived quality of life. (SBPMP, 107-10) Such benefits save cities and their taxpayers money, create new value for neighborhoods and commercial areas, and offer priceless contributions to the happiness and satisfaction of citizens. With the relationship between parkland and economic development in mind, it becomes clear that a comprehensive plan to preserve and protect South Bend parks and natural areas is needed to realize our full economic potential as a city.

Conclusion

In our 150th year, South Bend has a unique opportunity to reflect on its past and its future. A basic question is this: What kind of community could we become?

The proposed sale of Elbel represents is a true watershed moment, in all senses of the phrase. Our city could grow in new and exciting ways. We could protect and restore one of the most beautiful areas of our community, to pass along to future generations the loveliness and integrity of our natural world. We could provide our residents in perpetuity with a rich and expansive natural area in which to cherish family and friendship, to become healthier, to slow down and explore the land around us. We could do our part to improve the finances of South

Bend Parks, to maintain its services for all South Bend citizens. We could offer our children the natural education and enjoyment that they want and need. And we could establish our parks as the true cornerstone in our community's economic foundation. Considering education, the economy, and our community's quality of life, a restored and protected Elbel Park represents the best that our community could become.

Respectfully submitted to the South Bend Parks Board, local leaders, and all South Bend residents by the members of Elbel for Everyone

SHIRLEY HEINZE LAND TRUST (SHLT) ATTACHMENT

Shirley Heinze is a non-profit land trust, and makes permanently accessible to the public sixteen distinctive nature trusts, ranging from prairies and wetlands to dunes and forests. One of the largest providers of site-based ecological education to schools in the Chicagoland area, Shirley Heinze last year served nearly 3,700 children from 139 different classes via a curriculum developed with the Chicago Field Museum and the Dunes Learning Center. Shirley Heinze also offers its educational services to many other organizations, including Scout troops, Boys and Girls Clubs, daycares and environmental clubs. The Board of Shirley Heinze has recently approved a plan to offer its services in Saint Joseph County. In a March 2015 site visit, members of Shirley Heinze's staff and board studied the Elbel Park site, and described this large, beautiful, and ecologically valuable park as a truly rare and important conservation

opportunity. They have indicated their openness to further discussions involving the long-term protection of Elbel as a nature park accessible to all.

This year provides a unique opportunity to source and leverage funds for natural preserves. There is the possibility of applying for grants and soliciting donations from sources with ecological preservation and education as an identified priority, such as the Indiana Heritage Trust, the Community Foundation of Saint Joseph County, the Pokagon Fund, settlement funds from the Enbridge Pipeline, the Indiana Bicentennial Nature Trust, and local donors. Shirley Heinze has a strong record both of development activity and use of governmental and non-profit grants to support its mission. Please see their website, <http://www.heinzetrust.org/>, or an available brochure for more information on Shirley Heinze.