

Ecological Advocacy Committee Meeting – May 6, 2019

Location: Rum Village Nature Center

Committee members present: Steve Sass, Lindsey Chadderton, Alicia Czarnecki, Andrew Tucker, Allison Turner, Rachel Novick (late)

Others present: Garry Harrington

Call to order – Steve Sass at 8:41 am

Vote to approve minutes from March 4, 2019 EAC meeting by Lindsey Chadderton, seconded by Andrew Tucker, and approved unanimously.

Garry, Allison, and Rachel noted that they will be unable to attend the July 1 EAC meeting. (will be rescheduled)

Discussion:

- The week of 4/22 to 4/26, the City hosted National Association for Interpretation conference for the first time. It is a conference of naturalists and educators (e.g., cultural historic educators, environmental educators); 151 attended the conference. People from Ohio, Michigan, Indiana attended. Several South Bend / Elkhart environmental “influencers” were there (e.g., Aaron Perri and Daragh Deegan). It was well received, and important because it helped draw attention to nature and wildlife in South Bend.
- *35th street wetland project:* Looking at it for acquiring new parks properties. Andrew noted there were positive things going on there, related to partnerships with Notre Dame.
 - Andrew met with Rachel Novick and Patrick Sherman a month ago to see if Rachel might be able to accommodate this project as a student project. They decided it wouldn't be a great fit for her class, but brought up “Back the Bend” event. Volunteer coordinators got in touch with “Back the Bend,” last weekend 26 ND students got together to clean the wetland and pulled a lot of trash from the wetland. Lots of the students were freshmen interested in staying involved.
 - In addition to “Back the Bend,” Rachel mentioned a senior capstone engineering course and put the group in touch with Eric Horvath (who co-teaches the course with Liz Kerr). Patrick and Andrew pitched the idea to Eric, he was very receptive, indicated that the arrangement was 1 credit in fall and 3 credits in spring, so the students won't really dive in until spring. Unofficially, the 35th street wetlands has been added to the course project list and 4-5 students will be involved in site planning. They will perhaps meet with VPA regularly, talk with the community, and do hydrological monitoring to examine the potential for a boardwalk – scope to be finalized in discussions with the City. Patrick has been helpful, the City continues to be interested in the site, and has set aside some funds to move forward, but is looking for direction/ideas which the class will provide. This is comparable to the Pinhook project with the Rose-Hulman student study.
- *35th street wetland project:* Reed canary grass discussion
 - Lindsey identified there was a reed canary grass issue in the wetlands.
 - Andrew mentioned that in addition to pulling the trash, the students installed some signs indicating “unauthorized motor vehicle access is prohibited” which will helpfully slow the spread of the weeds (lots of ATVs going through). Thought about getting the students to cut back some weeds, but there was enough to do with the trash and the signs. Not really movement on this yet, ideally a professional firm would be contracted to do that work sooner rather than later, though Andrew might make some small fixes this spring.

- o Lindsey thinks we make the recommendation to the Park Board to undertake pre-emptive treatment and remove the weeds sooner rather than later.
- o Steve is worried we will run into an issue with how the property is deeded. Andrew clarified that the City owns it, it is zoned as single family residential, and there is allowance for parks under that zoning designation.
- o Garry also mentioned that it may not matter that it isn't technically zoned parks, given Aaron Perri's interest in the property as a park. We could write a recommendation along the lines of "Given the City's interest to turn this into a park, we recommend the City get rid of the weeds, otherwise it loses much of its value." The group agrees that this is a good course to take.
- o Lindsey: Goal is move toward eradication and minimize collateral damage to the rest of the plant community. Move toward a best management practice.
- **Action items related to 35th street:** EAC to recommend to park board that they or the City of South Bend get bids, hire a consultant to address the invasive vegetation problems at 35th street wetlands. It is our feeling the value of the property will be degraded if nothing is done.
 - o We are concerned about the value of the 35th Street property being degraded by invasive reed canary grass, which spreads rapidly and if unchecked will limit VPA's ability to create a quality park. We are therefore making a recommendation to hire a professional with expertise in reed canary grass to treat the invasive reed canary grass. It is difficult to treat and also if it is not treated carefully, native plant species can be impacted.
 - o Recommendation should be delivered to the Park Board as quickly as possible. We should be able to get this together in time to get on the Park Board's agenda two weeks from today.
 - o Key points: Note loss of value to the property, note that reed canary grass is difficult to control and very invasive, we need to move forward as soon as possible, be clear about "either the Park Board or the City" / whoever is responsible.
 - o Lindsey to write up the draft recommendation, with support from Andrew. We will all look it at electronically and get sent to Park Board prior to their next meeting. Park Board likes having their agenda items the Wednesday before the meeting, which gives us until May 15 to get it submitted.
 - o Andrew: Scott Namestnik (Senior Botanist at Orbis Consultants) has visited the site and identified a state-threatened sedge and several other plant species that are rare for St. Joseph County. The presence of these plants are "key indicators" that it is a high quality natural site. It is because of the high-quality plant community that we both emphasize the urgency of controlling the reed canary grass and the care with which it needs to be done to avoid collateral damage.
 - o Recommendation written will include detail on the ecological value of the property, as well as some potential best management practice options or documents to refer to, empowering the City to make an informed decision on removing the grass.
 - o Andrew: given expense and considerations, they might consider a staged approach. Doing some easy fixes in house initially (e.g., mowing it down), and then later hire a consultant to truly get rid of it.
- Is there anything that comes to mind pertaining 35th street that we would like to see in a park?
 - o Given we are in touch with Eric and Liz through Patrick, we could ask students to consult with us at some point. Maybe the students could come to one of our meetings and have a listening session with us.
 - o This should be done in the Fall.
- *Coal Line Trail*

- o Garry: Matthew Moyer is in biweekly discussion of the trail (not entirely sure who else in in that meeting). They plan to construct in 2020 and/or 2021. Garry contacted Matthew about this to see where things stand on this (Matthew did not come to Garry asking for the EAC's advice).
 - o Rachel: We could go out and walk the Coal Line trail to come up with suggestions for signage for the purpose of ecological education. We might also suggest planting more native plants alongside the trail to support pollinators.
 - o Last year, EAC had recommendation / determination that Coal Line Trail wouldn't affect ecology of Muessel Grove Park. Trail to run along the perimeter of the park. The park isn't one of exceptional ecological importance.
 - o This may be bigger than parks, there are other entities involved, would be nice to look beyond parks and other city departments are open to our suggestions (even though there is no legal reason for us to do so). Aaron Perri has used our recommendations to reach out to other City departments to get things done.
 - o How much does EAC want to be proactive vs reactive on projects? Reactive is responding to City requests, proactive is us going out in the community and recommending improvements as we see them. Garry thinks we should be proactive, as we have nothing to lose (at worst, the City ignores us or tells us to stick with the reactive stuff ... at best, they make changes!). Coal Line will give us an opportunity to be proactive, show how much help we can be if we observe early.
 - o Steve has introduced the EAC to many people and sometimes people call if they have concerns (e.g., woman worried about tree removal near Riley HS). No other EAC members have been contacted in this manner. How do we scale this up? Or, isn't this the City's job?
 - o Andrew thinks we could go to PRC Common Council Committee meetings representing the EAC, perhaps saying a few words during the public comment section of the meetings.
 - o Garry notes that people call 311, should we be in touch with 311 and ask for a report?
 - o Lindsey: I think Coal Line is being federally funded, so there may be an opportunity to put in requests that support native plants and animals.
 - o Andrew mentions that it's possible that every single Coal Line Trail link on the VPA project is broken / not available which should be corrected. Steve noted that this is a common problem, not limited to Coal Line.
 - o **Action item:** EAC to schedule outing where we walk Coal Line Trail and brainstorm thoughts.
- *Elbel*
 - o Garry: Matthew said he is arranging with Scott Namestnik to guide 3 educational hikes at Elbel. Water has been really high so planned route to hiking trail not all accessible. They are going to modify the golf hole order during the hikes to reduce traffic. The hikes will occur in August 2019, October 2019, February 2020 on weekend afternoons. Hikers must sign up to participate, sign ups will hopefully be online with a cut-off number (20-30).
 - o **Action item:** EAC to get these public hiking dates on their calendars! Otherwise, no action required.
 - o Very few people are going out to Elbel at the moment. Accessing the trails is tough, trails do not connect. Great to keep on the public's radar, but there are hurdles to it becoming a hiking destination. At least these hikes give the public the opportunity to be on the property and see it firsthand.
 - o Trail on the north side is in need of invasives management
- *Howard Park*

- o Garry: Things are going well. Official dedication to occur in fall / early winter.
- o Steve: emailed Brent to ask about tree species. Tree species were “written in stone” according to Brent, Brent gave Steve the list, half were non-native. Steve is quite upset that they are replacing with exotic trees. According to Brent, the Howard Park trees were “set in stone” but the Seitz Park trees are still up for discussion (similar makeup, half non-native). Who set them in stone? What does that mean?
- o Steve has added the Howard Park disappointment into our report to the Park Board. Steve asked a question on how often the Park Board wanted to see reports for us, they said approximately quarterly would be good.
- o Lindsey: new trees are not the same ecologically as old trees – they should not be treated as equivalent. Mature trees provide a different kind of habitat for birds, bats, and mammals. Does everything need to be native? We also need climate resilient and resilient to invasive insects and diseases (this should tie nicely to the City’s recently passed climate change resolution). There is a beech aphid that will eventually spread here and attack our native beeches.
- o If pricing is a concern, would we like to see fewer native trees or more mixed (native/non-native) trees?
- o Steve: in our tree report, we categorized trees by color. I think trees planted in parks should be in either the green or the yellow color.
- o Howard Park to have a bioswale, we want to hear more about the design and species composition. We made verbal suggestions to Patrick during our last meeting.
- **Action items related to Howard Park:**
 - Garry to email Aaron independently about our concerns at Howard Park, as our liaison.
 - Rachel to draft wording related to Howard Park trees, it will be added to the 35th street wetland recommendation, and we’ll call it a “May Report” to the Park Board.
 - o We see three concerns: (1) removal of old trees which serve an important function to wildlife (2) choice of exotic species as replacements (3) process and lack of consultation with EAC which led to these suboptimal outcomes. We want to see a better process for Seitz Park and all future projects.
- *Pinhook Park*
 - o Alicia: Appreciates that Steve was able to come to community meeting for Pinhook Park. Took the feedback and gave to consultants doing the design. Project funded by DNR, mostly looking at trail improvements, building improvements, boat dock improvements.
 - o There is not another community meeting scheduled. Alicia will get in touch with Patrick, see if there is another touch point and will get back to the EAC.
 - o Andrew and Lindsey: in addition to signs about removing weeds from boat, boaters need a pullout area, a hose, and a trash to put the weeds in.
 - o Steve mentions that there’s a lack of interest at Pinhook, saw a neat “walk of native trees” at Purdue Fort Wayne, emailed Aaron telling him about the walk and recommending something similar for Pinhook, Aaron loved the idea and said he would put it on agenda for next Pinhook meeting.
 - o Lindsey: I’m concerned about runoff from parking lots at Pinhook. There should be swales to manage the runoff so it doesn’t end up in the river. **Should we have a third recommendation on our Park Board document:** a planting plan for Pinhook that highlights native trees and education about them and also highlight and educate about green infrastructure to manage runoff from hardscape.
 - o Would be nice to get Patrick back for Pinhook updates at our next meeting. Also, it would be nice to get Kieran Fahey (City CSO) to a meeting to discuss the City’s green infrastructure plans and to see if there is a nexus with Parks.

- *Leeper Park*
 - o Garry: Waiting to hear about construction company that will be removing duck pond. Trying to make sure everything is set up in proper order
 - o Garry contacted IDEM and sewage treatment plant about putting contents of duck pond into treatment plant. It should be ok to put to the treatment plant. Sewage treatment plant says it's ok to put into sewer line, but not ok to dump directly into the river
- *Tree Ordinance* – no updates. Did our job, it was sent to Legal, Steve has emailed twice asking for updates, update is it's still at Legal.

Meeting adjourned – at 10:16 am

Submitted by Rachel Novick and Allison Turner

APPROVED

Minutes approved by Ecological Advocacy Committee 7/11/19