

South Bend Venues Parks and Art's Ecological Advocacy Committee

Triannual Report

**For the Period Covering:
July 16 to December 14, 2020**

Submitted by

Steve Sass
2020 Chair

Additional 2020 committee members:

Jo Borer
Lindsay Chadderton
John DiTillo
Amy Kryston
Alicia Pelligrino
Ally Pudlo
Andy Schnable
Andrew Tucker

Summary

The period from July to December 2020 saw the Ecological Advocacy Committee finish work on the draft of the 2021 Natural Resources Management Plan, provide support to South Bend in Ponader Park negotiations, and continue to advise VPA staff on ecological management practices. Contained within this report is a summation of committee activity and recommendations.

Introduction

This document is the third of three 2020 scheduled reports by the Ecological Advocacy Committee to the South Bend Park Board of Commissioners and the PARC Committee of the South Bend Common Council. The committee submitted the first report on March 11 and the second on July 15.

Natural Resource Management Plan (NRMP)

As stated in prior reports, the primary work of the 2020 EAC has been the revision and expansion of the Natural Resources Management Plan. Over the past ten months, the committee, along with VPA and city staff, pro bono consultants, and regional experts, wrote and assembled a comprehensive, 78-page document believed to be the first of its kind for an Indiana municipal park system.

In early October, VPA Partnerships, Community and Standards Coordinator Matthew Moyers submitted a draft of the 2021 NRMP to various VPA and South Bend departments, neighboring park systems, and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Following this vetting process, the EAC received a final draft of the document before the December 7 committee meeting. At that meeting, the EAC members voted unanimously to approve the draft for submission to the Board of Park Commissioners at their December 14 meeting.

Howard Park Bioswales

Concerned about the state of the Howard Park bioswales, on August 12, EAC members Steve Sass and Andy Schnabel, along with naturalist and EAC liaison Garry Harrington, surveyed the bioswales with representatives from Facilities and Grounds. During this visit, the EAC members assessed the status and relative success of the plantings and pointed out invasive plants for staff to control. Based upon the limited success of the installation, the lack of a management plan, and without professional guidance, the viability of the bioswales remains in question. Given the degree of the disturbance and the number of invasive species present in the seed bank, if the bioswales are to be successful, they will require focused maintenance for at least the next several years.



August 12 EAC visit to assess the Howard Park Bioswales

Ponader Park

At the August 7 special meeting of the Board of Park Commissioners, counsel for St. Joseph County indicated that it would be permissible for VPA to conduct a plant rescue operation within the area ceded to the county. In that meeting, Executive Director Perri expressed his desire for VPA division of Facilities and Grounds to be involved in that operation as the displaced plants would likely be transplanted into the bioswales at Howard Park. On November 2, two members of the EAC along with Garry Harrington visited Ponader Park to survey and begin mapping plants for relocation to Howard Park. Later that day, Mr. Harrington reported that due to a seasonal workload obligation that Facilities and Grounds would not be able to assist with the plant rescue. Without the needed help, the committee members concluded that the task of transplanting 50+ plants from Ponader to Howard Park was beyond the scope and capabilities of volunteer laborers. At the time of this report, the plant rescue has not occurred.

The committee continues to be concerned about the bioswale at Ponader Park. It is unclear when or who installed it, but it does serve a very functional purpose by holding and filtering stormwater from Douglas Road before it enters Juday Creek. In addition to the threat from the road expansion project, repeated mowing threatens the functionality of the swale by discouraging the survival of deep-rooted, native plants. Until the EAC and VPA staff can draft a comprehensive site-specific resources management plan for Ponader Park, as a stop-gap measure, Mr. Harrington has installed 70-plus marking stakes to discourage continued mowing of the swale.



Swale at Ponader Park holding and filtering stormwater

Fredrickson Prairie

Because it is a capped former landfill, Fredrickson Prairie requires annual maintenance to ensure that tree saplings do not penetrate and thereby compromise the clay cap. Following a September 2019 mowing of the prairie, the EAC requested that mowing should not take place during the growing season. Mowing during the spring or summer months destroys wildlife habitat and beneficial insect populations, diminishes visitor experience, and encourages exotic, invasive plants over natives. It is also inconsistent with South Bend's "Mayors for Monarchs Pledge," signed on February 23, 2016, by Mayor Buttigieg. Instead, maintenance should take place during the dormant season. Reportedly, due to a citizen's 311 complaint about "weeds," in August of 2020, a large portion of the prairie was again mowed during the growing season. The 2021 EAC will work to prioritize a management plan for Frederickson Prairie, which should include an educational component for both public and staff.



Fredrickson Prairie Following August Mowing

South Bend Code of Ordinance Chapter 19

On November 9, EAC Chair Sass presented to the PARC Committee the EAC and Forestry Division's recommended updates to Chapter 19 Sections 13 and 14 for the third time. At the time of this report, the current status is unknown.

Pinhook Park Native Tree Trail

The Indiana native tree trail at Pinhook Park is an exciting legacy project that the EAC is proud to have helped to champion. With an ambitious goal of installing all of the trees native to Indiana at Pinhook Park, approximately 30 of the 100-plus tree species are either already present or recently planted, with additional species slated for spring planting. An arboretum of native trees at Pinhook Park will promote sound ecological practices while also providing augmented interest to Pinhook Park. Slated to accompany the trees will be interpretive signage and a web presence.

EAC chair Sass and expert consultant Amanda Smith presented VPA with a proposed species list, an updated Pinhook tree inventory, assisted City Forester Brent Thompson with tree placement and provided the VPA design team with mock-ups for interpretive signage as well as a trail rendering map.

Interdepartmental Communication

August 3 Meeting - John Martinez Director of VPA Facilities and Grounds provided updates on Pinhook Park

October 26 Meeting - Patrick Sherman of VPA Facilities and Grounds provided updates on Pinhook, Gov. Joe Kernan, and Seitz Parks.

Community Outreach and Interaction - Riverside Trail Gardens

In recognition of their work with native plant gardens along Riverside Drive, EAC Chair Sass nominated the Keller Park Neighborhood Volunteers/Riverside Trail Garden Committee for Shirley Heinze Land Trust's "Bringing Nature Home Award." In August, the group was subsequently presented with a sign commemorating their dedication and achievement to native plant gardening.



The Keller Park Neighborhood Volunteers posing with the award

Personnel

Three EAC members, Jo Borer, Amy Kryston, and Alicia Pelligrino, have opted not to return for 2021, leaving Lindsay Chadderton and Steve Sass as the last remaining charter members. The committee will welcome three new members for 2021. Since 2017, the EAC has consisted of a combined 18 members.

With her resignation as Director of Sustainability, the EAC lost of-counsel member Therese Dorau.

Conclusions

In an unprecedented year in which the EAC was only able to conduct two of ten meetings in person, the committee still managed to make significant accomplishments. Hundreds of hours went into the creation of the 2021 NRMP, which, despite the challenges associated with working during a pandemic, still met the committee's targeted completion date. The EAC was able to step in and play a substantial role in mitigating the environmental damage resulting from the upcoming construction in and around Ponader Park and provide ecological guidance on matters related to Mud Lake and 35th Street Wetlands. Despite the challenges associated with yearly changes in committee members, the EAC has remained dedicated and focused on environmental topics affecting South Bend park properties.

Recommendations

Although not outlined in the NRMP, when VPA fields ecological questions and complaints via the 311 hotline, the department should consider utilizing the skills of the EAC to vet and help mediate citizen concerns before taking corrective action.