

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

Executive Summary (Please see White Paper for Full Analysis, Details, and Sources)

Elbel Park, established in 1961, is South Bend's largest city park, and contains the area's biggest body of water, Mud Lake, as well as rolling hills, forests, and wetlands. The park currently supports golf, hiking, snow-shoeing, bird-watching, running, sledding, and cross-country skiing. Elbel was once a candidate for a state park, owing to its beautiful views, importance for migrating wildlife, and unique ecology. In many ways, Elbel's fate is tied to important questions that all of us must answer, about the kind of community we want to become.

The city proposes to sell Elbel to private ownership, terminating public access to the park, as it recently did with Blackthorn Golf Course. This sale is prompted by several factors: Golf Operations at Elbel, Erskine, and Studebaker registered \$488,861 in losses between 2010-13, projected golf capital improvement costs in the next four years are forecast at over a million dollars, participation in golf has declined rapidly in the last five years, and general park budget problems mean the sale of public lands could help mitigate projected shortfalls.

This proposal, which would likely make Elbel either a privately operated golf course, or a residential development, creates tremendous problems for our community. The alienation of Blackthorn, Elbel, and Erskine would mean the total loss of 613 acres of public land in two years, reducing South Bend Park Department land to just 917 acres in total. This means South Bend would hold fewer park acres per 1,000 residents (9.07) than the median U.S. city of its density and type (14.8), as well as far fewer park acres than many prominent Midwestern cities such as Indianapolis, Akron, Madison, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, to name a few. As parks have proven benefits for economic development, community health, and property tax assessments, South Bend's back of the pack status would drastically diminish its competitiveness and quality as a city. Because Elbel Park is just outside city limits, development of the land would mean no new tax revenue for South Bend. It is unlikely that any sale would recover close to the investment South Bend citizens placed in Elbel (4.1 million in today's dollars), resulting in a large loss of citizen equity. Financially, the sale of Elbel seems sensible in only the most narrow and short-term of perspectives.

Taking seriously Elbel's unique and irreplaceable beauty and value, as well as the financial challenges that face the city and the Parks Department, we propose a way forward that protects public access to Elbel in perpetuity, eliminates ongoing revenue shortfalls from Golf Operations and projected

capital improvements, achieves many strategic goals outlined in the South Bend Parks Master Plan, and contributes to education and economic development in our community.

Elbel's special combination of lake, wetland, hills, forest, and meadows, and decades of support of hikers, bird-watchers, nature lovers, and winter sports, indicate its vital place in our community. No other city park can match its size, beauty, diversity of habitats, or potential. Our proposal envisions a partnership with a land trust with a proven record of environmental protection and ecological education. Partnership with a land trust would, at no cost to taxpayers, protect the many of the recreational activities Elbel currently sustains, develop non-profit capacity in our community to educate and involve children in the restoration and importance of natural areas, provide a purchase price to ameliorate projected shortfalls elsewhere in the Parks Department budget, and restore Elbel as a healthier and more vital nature preserve. A recommended partner would be Shirley Heinze Land Trust. Shirley Heinze has indicated its interest in exploring such a partnership, and has a strong record of successful collaboration with governments, non-profits, and private donors in providing natural preserves to the public, and offers innovative ecological education to thousands of children each year. Such a collaboration would assist the city in reaching many goals stated in the Parks Master Plan, including *"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"*.

In our city's 150th year, 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. In many ways, a restored and protected Elbel Park represents the best that our community could become.