



Department of Public Works  
Parks Division

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To: Madison Mayor and Common Council Members  
Madison Board of Park Commissioners  
Madison Neighborhood Associations

SUBJECT: Expansion of Park Meadow Areas

Park Meadows are unmowed grassy areas with scattered trees that are mowed every year or two to prevent invasion of non-native brush (small weed patches also require more frequent mowing). Meadows may be tall grass prairie or short grass fescue, may be mostly grass or showy with wildflowers, or may be planted with trees for future forest.

Lawn turf is mowed in the park system on a 7-10 day cycle to provide optimum conditions for recreational use and for a "groomed park aesthetic". Park meadows provide a "natural meadow aesthetic" and support a more nature-based form of park recreation. Our park and greenway system now includes approximately 1,200 acres of meadows, 2,200 acres of mowed and developed areas, and 3,000 acres of woods and wetlands that are never mowed. The park meadows have become an important part of the park system that should be embraced and managed as a significant positive feature.

Meadows have been included in park master plans since the 1970s, but have been implemented in new parks much more consistently since 1990, partly in response to continuing budget constraints. In 1998, the Parks Division began a program to increase meadow areas in older existing parks, and more areas have been added every year. For most of the new parks, meadows are designated on the master plan and approved by the Park Commission. Buffer areas and the sites of future tennis courts, park shelters, picnic areas and secondary playfields are left as meadows until facilities are developed. These areas may total 10-40% of the park area, and save significant staff time. As more facilities are developed, the mowing areas are revised.

Park meadows have generally been well accepted in recent years as they have become more common and established in very visible areas, such as shoreline buffer strips in major parks (Vilas, Brittingham, Warner etc.). The Engineering Division has also reduced the mowing of most drainage greenways to once annually.

There are several benefits to establishing park meadows throughout our 6000+ acre park system. From a Parks perspective, these benefits are: creation of more diverse habitats and aesthetics, tree protection from mower damage, better groundwater infiltration, and goose control. Other benefits from reduced mowing are labor cost savings, fuel savings, reduced air pollution and better maintenance of the areas that must be mowed for recreation use.

Over the past 50 years, we have continuously added park acreage without adding maintenance staff, and when grass grows well, we cannot keep up. The time between mowings should be kept under 10 days, but has often increased beyond that, allowing the grass to get too tall in all of the mowed areas. The longer the grass gets, the longer it takes to mow and the further we get behind. When we get behind, even the areas that should be the highest priority have unusually tall grass.

Identifying areas that do not need frequent mowing is the only way for the Parks Division to address this issue within our current budget. With budget reductions and absorption of cost increases for 2006, the Parks Division will have to cut actual operational services by about \$700,000. The only service reduction approved in the 2006 budget is the reduction of mowing. We can mow most efficiently with large mowers in big open areas. We can also place most of the trees in the meadows. This saves time by not having to trim around the trees with less efficient small mowers, and it saves the trees because mowers and string trimmers do not damage them.

Park meadows also provide a different type of landscape within the park system. These are places that provide more diverse vegetation for wildlife, and add a more natural element to the parks. The vegetation can be enhanced by planting some areas to native prairie grasses and wildflowers (the standard seed mix for new drainage greenways). New meadows may be weedy for the first few years, and may have patches mowed more than once in the early years to control thistles, ragweed or other noxious plants. However, most of the plants are not noxious, and tend to choke out the weeds over time. Many people enjoy watching the natural succession of plants as these grassy areas mature, and value the diversity that they provide to the park system. As we expand the meadows throughout the park system, we must be committed to planting, where necessary, to improve the vegetation.

The meadows are intended to be mowed on an annual or two-year cycle to control invasion of unwanted trees and shrubs. However, in areas such as along an oak woods, natural invasion will be monitored so that desirable trees from the woods can be allowed to grow to maturity.

#### Other Measures for Maintenance Reduction

In some areas where limited-mowing meadows would be very small or objectionable, substantial savings and environmental benefits can be achieved by reducing the trim-mowing and string-trimming. A policy could be set to leave a one-foot buffer untrimmed around designated trees. This would save summer hourly time, and free staff to perform maintenance with greater long-term importance to the park system, such as removal of invasives. For consideration by the Park Commission, staff proposes that we implement a one-foot untrimmed buffer around all trees that are not along street frontages, or near heavily used areas like playgrounds and picnic areas. This policy would include trees that are primarily adjacent to residential backyards.

#### Park Acreage by Maintenance Category

Parks staff has completed a preliminary analysis to map and quantify maintenance categories for all of the park acreage. The preliminary breakdown is into 3 categories:

Developed and Mowed includes all developed facilities, hard surfaced areas, and areas that are mowed weekly for lawn turf.

Meadows includes those areas that are mowed every year or two.

Never-Mowed includes undeveloped parks, wetlands, woodlands, and also many low quality woods-meadow areas that are becoming reforested. Proposed meadows would be subtracted from the mowed acreage. Another goal is to convert some "young woods" from never-mowed to meadows, so they can be mowed annually to control invasives and manage the reforestation process. The Maintenance Category Tables and maps for your specific area are attached.

Landscape Management and Citizen Participation

There are some choices to be made for park meadows: Where should they be? Tall grass or short? Grassy or add prairie flowers? Control invasives with complete mowing or selected removals? Add trees for a future forest? Add spring bulbs? Many of our existing parklands are managed with the guidance and assistance of neighborhood organizations and individual volunteers (e. g. Friends of Yahara River, Hoyt Park, Monona Bay, etc). Their assistance often gives them the opportunity to do it the way they prefer, rather than the only way the Parks Division can afford. We welcome the ideas and volunteer efforts of neighborhoods to help us expand and improve the park meadows program.

Approval Process

The decision on how to achieve and adjust the balance between highly maintained areas and more natural areas is a significant policy decision for the Park Commission. To provide the public with an opportunity to comment, maps and inventory tables of existing and proposed Meadow areas are being sent to each Neighborhood Association and Alder for the parks in their areas. A public listening session is scheduled for the Park Commission meeting to hear public comments and determine the mowing policies and park meadow expansion areas for 2006 and beyond. This will be at the Park Commission meeting of April 19, 2006. The meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center with the Listening Session scheduled for 7:00 p.m.

If you have questions, please contact me or Simon Widstrand at 266-4711.

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Superintendent of Parks

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attachments

