

Parks Operations Report September 2023 – March 2024

The predicted El Nino winter brought below average precipitation and above average temperatures to Madison this past season. Except for a two week stretch which brought over 20 inches, snow removal events were well below average. The warm temperatures also vastly reduced typical winter activities like ice skating and cross-country skiing at parks. Most City ice rinks were open less than a week this year and some never opened. Fortunately, the well trained and versatile staff in Operations were able to pivot from traditional winter duties to other crucial tasks.

CONSERVATION

Staff continued to support implementation of Parks' Land Management Plan by developing and documenting strategy and processes for managing natural areas throughout the system. The Habitat Management Plan for Tier 2 Managed Meadows was presented to the Habitat Stewardship Subcommittee in the fall, along with the first 5-year update of the Habitat Management Plan for Owen Conservation Park. Newly drafted habitat management plans for Elvehjem Sanctuary and Cherokee Marsh Mendota Unit were also presented and indicate the path forward to actively managing park acreage that had previously been left to degrade through fire exclusion and unchecked invasive species populations. The systematic approach is allowing Parks to better leverage resources to secure incremental improvements in habitat quality – and thus ecological sustainability - across the system. These resources include staff time, volunteer effort, and capital-funded contract work.

Staff made much progress on clearing invasive brush this winter. This work boosted some sites to the next stage along their restoration trajectories and brought additional acres under active management at others – initiating a restoration trajectory where there had only been a degradation trajectory before. With the extra help from the Public Works Laborer crew, the team was able to complete significant invasive species and woody debris removal projects at Cherokee Marsh, Edna Taylor, Knollwood, Prairie Ridge, and Turville Point.



Conservation staff and Public Works Laborer crew removing invasive brush at Edna Taylor.

Lack of snow cover facilitated rapid progress on this work. Sites and woody stems were more accessible, and staff was available since ski trails were only open for less than three weeks at most locations this winter. While Madison has seen some relief, it remains in “Abnormally Dry” conditions according to the National Drought Mitigation Center.

Volunteer effort continues to advance restoration of the conservation parks. Friends groups hosted volunteer workdays at Cherokee Marsh Mendota Unit, Meadow Ridge, and Owen, and independent volunteers worked at Prairie Ridge. These efforts were focused on sowing native seed mixes, cutting invasive shrubs like buckthorn and honeysuckle, and disposing of slash by burning brush piles. This work will allow additional seeding, invasive species control, and ultimately, more effective management of these areas.

Contractors performed initial work in portions of Moraine Woods, Sandburg Woods, and all three units of Cherokee Marsh: Mendota, North and South. Together, this brought an additional 50 acres under active management through invasive species removal. Contractors also continued ongoing woodland restoration project work at Acewood, Heritage Sanctuary, Owen, Stricker's Pond, and Turville Point.



Forestry mowed area at Cherokee South. This initial invasive shrub removal will be followed by prescribed grazing this summer.



Seven of the ten burn crew members.

Prescribed fire is integral to maintaining the native species and habitats that occur in and around Madison. Parks' prescribed fire program has achieved a new level of capacity with full, permanent staffing in the Conservation Section and the Ecology Team. Together, these 10 employees, whose position descriptions all involve some level of prescribed fire duties, form a consistent core burn crew that can meet the increasing work demand for fire as more acres are managed with an ecologically sustainable focus. This team was able to burn 70 acres across seven parks in the fall, including five general parks and two conservation parks.

CONSTRUCTION

The Construction team was able to work on numerous projects due to the warm and dry weather this past season. The addition of Andy Ayres as the new Equipment Operator 3 filled the hole left by Margaret Kraege who retired after a long and successful career. Andy's first job was assisting in the construction of a retention pond at Glacier Hills Park to prevent flooding in adjacent properties. Significant work was also undertaken at Glenwood Children's Park to mitigate storm water damage caused over the last few years.



Glenwood Children's Park

Construction also continued to assist other Operation sections on projects that benefited from their skillsets. These included hauling snow from the Mall Concourse, refreshing surfacing mulch in numerous playgrounds, regrading a softball diamond at Demetral Park and installing a batting cage at Bowman Park. The team also regraded a large area at Goodman Park to accommodate a Nicerink ice rink system using a new laser assisted grading skid loader.



Goodman Ice Rink

In addition, projects completed include turf restoration work at Elver Park around the new cricket pitch installed earlier in the summer by a contractor. Two buildings were razed by the team, a house on recently acquired land adjacent to Whitetail Ridge Park and a small building in Olin Park that once housed the telephone connections for a trailer park.



Whitetail Ridge

FACILITIES MAINTENANCE

Stewardship of the parks historical buildings continue to be a focus of the facilities department. During this quarter the facilities department partnered with City Engineering on renovations to Brittingham rowing boathouse and James Madison boathouse. The Brittingham boathouse was repainted by a contractor and facilities staff have been busy restoring 18 sets of shutters and hardware, and entrance lighting. On the inside the parks staff have replaced the water heater with a new energy efficient tankless water heater and new water softener. At James Madison boathouse work continues and renovations. Phase 2 of window and siding replacement has gone to bid, and facilities staff have been working on repairs to inside trim, doors, and the roof.

In addition, Facilities staff replaced siding and painted the Vilas beach shelter, Quann tennis shelter, Olbrich tennis bounding board and several signs, poles, and kiosks. Roofs were replaced at Wingra boat house and Quann Park with architectural shingles. The Park's carpenters completely stripped down and are rebuilt the Law Park boat launch pier which includes new decking, new floats, repairs to the frame, and painting.

Staff continued to provide essential park maintenance services during the quarter, including fountain maintenance, winter recreation start-up and shutdown, responding to work orders, and capital and special projects. Special project work included donor plaques for the Glen Golf Park, donor benches and tables, mural installation at McPike Park, and Bedford Street property painting, cleaning, and window boarding.



Refurbished signature sign



The Glen donor plaques

GENERAL PARKS

The unusually hot and dry summer and winter meant general Parks did not perform as much routine maintenance such as snow removal and turf mowing. This gave staff time to concentrate on many other deferred maintenance and improvement projects. Coordinating work with volunteers, other city agencies, and within the park sections allowed staff to expand their focus beyond routine parks work. Some of the projects improved recreation for park users and some focused-on parks' commitment to environmental sustainability and restoration of native landscapes.

East Parks staff restored the brick paver labyrinth at Carpenter-Ridgeway park. The brick pavers were overgrown with turf so staff cut a new edge along the outside of the pavers, scraped off accumulated dirt and grass and widened the path out to its original condition.



Carpenter Ridgeway labyrinth



Madison Parks hosted Trucks and Treasures on September 16 at Warner Park. General Parks staff displayed several pieces of machinery and answered questions for this family friendly event. Other community park events staff participated in were Family Halloween and a Candlelight Snowshoe Hike at Warner Park.

Environmental Sustainability and Climate Resilience are important components of the Parks Land Management Plan as it moves into the future. Replenishing the urban tree canopy and restoring native landscapes is part of our work plans. Projects involving Parks staff, the Ecology team, Streets staff and community volunteers are happening all over in parks.

The Ecology Team lead the work of multiple volunteer groups including Wild Warner, Madison firefighter recruits, Clean Lakes Alliance, AmeriCorps and Heartland Credit Union. They also worked on projects with General Parks Staff, the Streets Median Crew and Operation Fresh Start. With help from these groups, they were able to work on a wide scope of restoration projects from invasive species removal, to planting, and seed collection.



Restoration and beautification projects

Restoration projects were done at Warner, Kingston-Onyx, Acewood, Tenney Lapham, Hill Creek, and Marshall Parks. This work involved invasive species removal and re-seeding with native plants. In some of the areas prescribed fire will be introduced to maintain the woodlands. At Hoyt Park a large area of mowed turf

with open grown canopy oak trees was converted into managed meadow by planting native seeds. This will eliminate weekly mowing reducing our carbon footprint, protect the oaks root structure, encourage regeneration and providing pollinator habitat.



Warner restoration



Lakeside office tree planting with the mayor

The Ecology team planted over 200 trees and burned 12 acres in 5 different parks. They were awarded the Team City award by the mayor. And with the mayor's help, planted the first phase of the landscape plan for the new Lakeside Parks office building.



Tree planting



Eco team receiving Team City award

The staff at Forest Hill Cemetery removed five large boulders from a single grave site they were digging. The crew said they were some of the largest boulders they had ever removed from a single site. At Elvehjem Park, the All-Wheel volunteer group funded and built a skate park on the old tennis court.



Forest Hill



Elvehjem skate park

Parks is excited to have a new skid steer mounted forestry mower. The attachment will help restoration efforts by quickly and efficiently clearing the understory in our woodland and savanna restorations. The Parks Arborist's new Spider Lift has been extremely useful in accessing difficult areas for tree removals. Parks has also coordinated work with the Forestry Division for assistance with larger more dangerous tree removals.



Work in Madison Parks has been productive and exciting in the last several months. Operations staff enjoys the challenge of working with volunteers, other sections and agencies to expand their knowledge with new projects and take on a variety of tasks outside of typical seasonal parks work.

MALL CONCOURSE

Mall Concourse Maintenance continued to provide excellent service for the downtown area regarding snow maintenance. Although there were limited snow events, the team prospered through a challenging situation with subzero temperatures for over a week after a heavy snowfall. Service Area sidewalks were down to bare pavement for safe pedestrian walking conditions. Downtime during the limited snowfalls included Bobcat and Cage plow training at Bowman Park for the inexperienced operators. Mall Maintenance also teamed up with the Streets Division to test brining on sidewalks before snow events.

Hardscape maintenance continued with the warm temperatures. Power washing in February became a routine with above freezing temperatures. Bus shelters, light poles, benches, and other amenities were thoroughly cleaned.

Mall Maintenance assisted other City agencies regarding Bus Rapid Transit station installations that started in the middle of February. Benches, bike racks, and planters were removed for the BRT stations on State Street and the Capitol Square. Project completion is scheduled to end in late April.

The team supported limited events during the winter months. The BID's "Shine On" event continued throughout the winter, with Mall Maintenance assisting with the snowflake lights and other seasonal decorations. Mild weather also led to Mall Maintenance changing the seasonal pedestrian pole banners from winter to spring to symbolize the warmer weather.



State Street snow removal



Bike rack installation