

PLEASE REVIEW AND
RETURN TO STAFF

Comments on the
Draft Cherokee Special Area Plan
"Recommendations for Land Use and Development"

prepared by

Joe E. Meisel, Ph.D. (Zoology, UW-Madison)
Vice-President, Ceiba Foundation for Tropical Conservation
513 Bowman Avenue
Madison, WI 53716
Email: jemeisel@wisc.edu

13 December 2006

To Whom it May Concern,

As a biologist, an experienced conservationist and a concerned citizen, I am pleased to provide comments on the current draft Cherokee Special Area Plan, and the recommendations contained within regarding the purchase, easement and development of lands within the greater Cherokee Marsh area. I have reviewed the draft Plan, and the supporting maps and other materials made available by the City of Madison. I made a brief site visit to the area on the morning of 13 December, and conducted informal discussions with members of the Friends of Cherokee Marsh (of which I am not a member) and the City Parks Commission.

Allow me to make it clear at the outset that I accept the necessity for growth by the City of Madison, and adjacent townships, and that I am not inherently opposed to development. I respect the fact that the City of Madison must make difficult choices in order to balance the competing interests of developers, homeowners and conservation-minded citizens.

The authors of the Special Area Plan are to be commended for their commitment to protecting the ecological and aesthetic values of Cherokee Marsh. A substantial portion of the document is dedicated to summarizing the services provided by a healthy marsh ecosystem, such as rainwater filtering and flood protection, and reviewing the applicable federal, state and local ordinances constraining development near marshes. Furthermore the Plan specifically recommends green building materials, rain gardens, exotic species control, and other environmentally sound approaches to housing construction in sensitive areas. Finally, several statements in the Plan underscore the importance of "view protection," with specific reference to High Hill and the Hornung Woods.

The Plan therefore reveals a laudable desire on the part of the City to restrain growth in an informed, intelligent fashion that takes into account the needs of developers, the ecological value of intact biological systems, and the desires of many of Madison's dedicated conservationists to protect the city's many areas of natural habitat. The open nature of the Parks and Planning Commission meetings which will establish the final Special Area Plan, and the willingness of these groups to receive public comment, further underscore the City's commitment to finding a solution mutually acceptable to all parties.

The multi-area and multi-solution approach described in the current draft Plan permits considerable flexibility in meeting the City's prior agreements with developers while maintaining a commitment to the conservation of the marshlands currently held by Cherokee, Inc. The authors have made several wise choices, such as the outright purchase of the marsh section of Sub-area 5 ("Fifth Addition"), and the implementation of easements in Sub-area 6 ("High Hill"). A number of other recommendations in the Plan, however, are in my opinion less wise choices that appear to sacrifice too much of the integrity of the greater Cherokee Marsh lands. I believe that a variety of modifications to the Plan could be adopted that would greatly strengthen the City's commitment to protecting the environment, with little or no negative impact on the needs of developers.

Many recommended modifications to the Plan have been prepared by the Friends of Cherokee Marsh. While I subscribe in principal to their broad aims, I have not had time to adequately review all their suggestions in detail. I will let their representatives speak for themselves, and instead present my own suggestions of how the draft Plan can be improved. If my suggestions coincide at times with those of the Friends, let that be taken as a form of concordance between like-minded environmentalists.

First and foremost, I argue that the lands to the north of Wheeler Road (Sub-area 1, "Hornung Range"), are unsuitable for development. I offer several justifications. First, those lands clearly form the upland rim of the current marsh, due to their north-facing slope. Development in this sub-area would lead to greater runoff of storm wastewater and lawn-care chemicals directly into the marsh, with potentially severe and pervasive negative impacts on the marsh community. Second, as a nearby upland, such lands could serve as valuable habitat and foraging grounds for wildlife species (e.g., waders, cranes) that occur in the marsh. Note that although a considerable proportion of the sub-area currently is mowed grass, there also are sizeable woodlots and shrubby areas, and recovery to a natural upland community would likely occur rapidly and without expensive intervention. Third, the open areas of the western portion of this sub-area could serve as an ideal ecological corridor, linking the open marshes to the residential neighborhoods to the south, and permitting a green and aesthetically pleasing route for residents to access the trails and attractions of the marsh.

The north-eastern section of Sub-area 1 deserves special mention. Development in this section should be prohibited, because of its close proximity to the Dane County Airport's Runway Protection Zone. The marshlands within the Zone can be expected to remain as marsh, and development within this section therefore will insert a peninsula of residential properties into a pristine marsh, with the associated deleterious effects of runoff, vehicle-wildlife collisions, introduction of invasive species and so forth.

In short, development should not be permitted north of Wheeler Road, and time should be provided to various concerned groups (including the Friends of Cherokee Marsh) to seek outside funding to enable the purchase of this area, so that it may be allowed to regenerate, and re-unite biologically with the marsh.

The Plan's proposal to install low-density housing units in the area currently occupied by Hornung's Woods (Sub-area 2, western section) is, in my opinion, a poor use of a fine forested resource. As a biologist who has studied the role of forest fragments in human-managed systems, I can attest to the importance of forest patches such as Hornung's Woods. Native wildlife relies on such forests, for food and shelter, nesting and hibernating locations, and as a thermal refuge from the extremes of Wisconsin's climate. Additionally, migratory species such as Warblers repeatedly have been shown to utilize such forests as "stepping stones" or "stop overs" during their long, and climatically challenging, journey to the northern forests of the

US and Canada. Finally, these woods, located as they are near to an extensive marsh, provide valuable habitat for species that utilize and reside in the marsh.

From a human standpoint, the Hornung Woods serve several purposes. Aesthetically, they provide residents an opportunity to experience a natural habitat within their own community; the current proposal to replace the woods, in part, with a "swings and see-saws" park will dramatically change the character of the site. Second, these woods form an integral part of the eco-corridor mentioned above, connecting the residential areas to the marsh via a continuous green space passing through sub-area 1 and into Cherokee Marsh proper. Indeed, the aesthetic value of these woods are mentioned in the draft Plan, which recommends that "some trees along the perimeter" be preserved so as to achieve "view protection." The Commission should be advised that numerous conservation agencies (i.e., The Nature Conservancy, the Wildlife Conservation Society, et al.) have lambasted just this sort of development: the gutting of a forest by large houses, masked by the retention of perimeter trees, effectively destroys the habitat while preserving the illusion of remaining forest.

In closing, I reiterate that much of the contents of the draft Plan outline an admirable balance between developer needs and environmental protection. Modifications to the Plan can be made, however, that substantially improve the degree of protection afforded the marsh lands, without overtly negatively affecting the carefully controlled growth of the City's residential districts. I urge the Parks and Planning Commissions to consider carefully the fact that land use decisions made today will severely limit the environmental protection options available in the future. Thus these decisions must be made carefully, and with regard towards the potential costs of future protection (e.g., purchase of additional lands by the City) and the potential risks of under-protecting a natural system that provides critical flood mitigation and filtration of storm water overflow.

The Commissions are to be congratulated for developing an excellent draft Plan, and for seeking public comment. I hope that the recommendations contained in this letter, along with the proposals of the Friends of Cherokee Marsh, be given serious consideration. Indeed, they seek only to improve the Plan, for all concerned.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Joe E. Meisel".

Joe E. Meisel, Ph.D.