

May 27, 2011

To: City of Madison Board of Park Commissioners
From: Si Widstrand, 7226 Branford Lane East, Madison 53717

Re: Proposed Management Plan for Natural Park Lands

The founding and growth of the Madison Park System was based on a community value of preserving natural lands and landscapes. If we value the lands that have been preserved, then we must make its continued preservation one of our basic services. Now it is time to evaluate our lands, plan for what we want to have in 50 years, and what we have to do to get there. With staff turnover, it's also time to begin building a new generation of Conservation staff.

We have learned valuable lessons from the last 50 years of land management, and it has grown into an important field of work. We have better tools, computers, maps, and mowers; better consultants, contractors and native plant nurseries; better trained conservation employees coming out of universities. We also have greater public awareness – Aldo Leopold and his Land Ethic have never had wider understanding and publicity than currently. There is a general acceptance, and a legal requirement, for controlling invasive species.

The City of Madison needs to establish a basic level of service for the preservation of city natural areas. The City has been very successful in the last 50 years at acquiring 4000 acres of park and drainageway land that is NOT mowed turf or developed facilities. But we are ignoring too many areas. We don't have a good inventory, plan or program to provide basic maintenance for most of these wild areas and prevent them from being overwhelmed by invasive species. This must be part of the City's basic services package. Otherwise we will have invested in saving 4000 acres of natural lands, but will not have done what is necessary to preserve the value of that land for future generations. Most people probably assume that we are already performing this function. A little more effort and expense can make a huge difference in what we leave for the future.

The attached proposal provides a basic framework for addressing this issue. It has been reviewed by members of several Commissions and their staffs, and also by other people interested in volunteer land management. The Board of Public Works has recommended that they conduct a 3-year pilot project on ten of their prairie greenways, using a different maintenance approach that would enhance high quality prairies and increase their targeted treatment of invasive species.

If we invested a million dollars in a built facility, we would expect to spend an average of \$10,000 on annual maintenance to protect our investment. If we invested a million dollars in 10 acres of natural land to be preserved for future generations, should we provide \$1,000/acre/year to preserve it? Or at least some minimal effort at basic maintenance of all areas? It is more of a values question than a budget question.

I urge the Commission to support better land management with a motion similar to the 2006 Park Commission approval for expanding managed meadows. I suggest the following motion:

That the Park Commission supports the concept of providing basic management of all natural and undeveloped city-owned land, as outlined in the proposal reviewed by the Park Commission on 6/8/11. And that the Parks staff work with other City departments, volunteers and neighborhoods to develop and implement a plan for basic management of all City natural areas.

Cc: Mayor Paul Soglin
Attachment