

VILAS PARK

1602 Vilas Park Drive
Madison, Wisconsin

Master Plan Report

City of Madison Parks Division

Board of Park Commissioners
March, 2021

DRAFT

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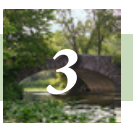
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vilas Park Master Plan seeks to strike a necessary balance between design best practices, the known needs of a large and ever-expanding park system and the myriad and often overlapping interests expressed through community input meetings, stakeholder group sessions, public comment and neighborhood associations. Since public engagement would play a key role in the development of the master plan, the development of a public engagement strategy was guided and informed by the City of Madison's Racial Equity and Social Justice Initiative (RESJI) Comprehensive Tool. Use of the RESJI tool assisted in the development of the requirements for the comprehensive engagement strategy outlined in the Request for Proposals (RFP) used to solicit proposals from consultant firms to lead the master plan process. From that RFP, a consultant team, led by MSA Professional Services, Inc. was selected in early 2019 to perform historical research, parking lot counts, park use observations and intercept interviews, inventory and analysis of the site's existing condition, traffic counts and analysis, review of prior studies related to the park, and research into current regulatory requirements influencing park development.

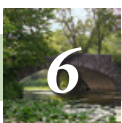
This park master plan report summarizes the research, public comment and input meetings, which took place over the subsequent two years of time to arrive at the proposed improvements for Vilas Park. The influence on the project of the local arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and subsequent COVID-19 pandemic must be noted as it relates to the project's efforts to effectively meet and discuss the project with individuals traditionally underrepresented in larger plenary efforts. However, despite in-person and on-site meetings being severely curtailed due to the pandemic, the in-person project meetings held with focus groups and on-site intercept interviews that occurred prior to March 2020 along with the findings from outreach work available through the 2018-2023 Park and Open Space Plan (POSP) and 2018 Comprehensive Plan provided important insights into citywide park system need and the importance of considering the needs of diverse populations and user groups in providing plans for park improvements intended to last 50 years or more. As with any project, opportunities for improvement exist and the Parks Division looks forward to working with the Board of Park Commissioners to refine future master planning efforts.

This report describes the project's "design drivers", which were utilized during the concepts, draft and final master plan phases to describe the larger design moves presented in the plan:

- Vilas Park Drive – the plan describes limiting vehicular access to the east side (1-way in/out at Orchard St); automobiles can access the park's southern and lakeshore amenities from the east side and through the park until the turn-around located at the main shelter; public input received during the project strongly supported the elimination of pedestrian/bicycle and vehicle conflicts and to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety to the extent possible throughout the park and the conversion of Vilas Park Drive to a multiuse path is one of the ways that the plan seeks to meet that interest;
- Main park shelter – the proposed shelter replacement sits generally on the footprint of the existing shelter, allowing for the current building to remain in-place while items that may be approached earlier for construction are being completed; the draft also proposes a series of additional picnicking opportunities – both through the addition of open-sided shelters and picnic nodes. The expansion of both sheltered and open picnicking opportunities at the park meets both a current need in that the single reservable picnic shelter is often fully booked during the season as well as a system-wide need described in the POSP.

- Parking - parking lots have been consolidated in the plan to recover greenspace within the park and to minimize vehicular travel; the lot to the south of the zoo adds a formal bus queueing area and protected passenger unload lanes to enhance safety and access for visitors arriving via yellow or charter bus; additional parking areas at the south bring visitors closer to key amenities along the lakeshore and lagoon such as the beach, fishing access points and main shelter. The lot to the north of the zoo has been expanded and the ingress/egress point has been moved opposite Campbell St to remove known pedestrian/bicycle conflicts at the Grant-Drake St exit point and the quasi-5 point intersection and entry to the zoo at the north that was formalized over time at Drake St and S Randall Ave. An expanded lot closest to the proposed tennis/pickleball/basketball complex offers spaces for players of those sports as well as those accessing an additional canoe/kayak launch point to the lagoon. Parks recognizes that additional study and consultation with City Traffic Engineering, Wisconsin State Historical Society and The Ho-Chunk Nation, as well as first responder agencies will be undertaken prior to the development of construction documents for the revised north parking lot and entryway.
- Open Space and Active Recreation – the plan recognizes the importance of the large open greenspace in the center area of the park and the significant views it offers to Lake Wingra by preserving this area for active and passive recreation. The sport court area to the west is proposed to include both dedicated tennis and pickleball courts as well as retaining full-court basketball and offering four square; an on-land ice hockey rink is included with proximity to the year-round shelter.
- Playgrounds - two playground areas are included in the master plan. The Shoe playground area is expanded to include areas for both 2-5 and 5-12 age range equipment which is the current standard for Community level parks in the system and a smaller nature-based play area is proposed on the western side of the park where a conventional playground currently is located. The playground to the north closest to Erin St is not returned in the master plan based on Parks' mound management policy and per discussions with The Ho-Chunk Nation that the focus of the mound sites will be to preserve and honor the sacred land in accordance with established standards – and that Parks, in its role as current and future stewards of the mounds within the City of Madison Parks system, it will not be placing children's play environments in proximity to mound sites.
- Lagoon and Lake Wingra - in Phase II of the project, three concepts for the lagoon were put forward to assist the project team in understanding the interest in maintaining an open-water condition at the lagoon – which, if left to its own devices, would continue to slowly fill-in through sedimentation and vegetation encroachment. The concepts offered three potentials for the lagoon: fully open water condition and the associated dredging and annual weed cutting that would be required along with a fully vegetated condition that would allow a slow return to a boggy/wetland type condition and a '50-50' option that offered a bit of each: on-lagoon activities such as skating and fishing could continue but the maintenance obligation of weed cutting operations and dredging might be reduced. The final plan moves forward this '50-50' option in recognition of the high-level of support on-lagoon activities received through public input and per discussions with WiDNR staff regarding habitat enhancement and invasive species management possibilities for the lagoon and lake. Further study to determine the optimal dredging depth to attain for the lagoon, as well as management discussion regarding the extent and nature of vegetation management, will be performed prior to the implementation of this option.

This plan, adopted by the Board of Park Commissioners, will guide development of Vilas Park and conforms to the Statement of Policy and Guidelines for Master Plan Activities within the Madison Parks System.





1. INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Henry Vilas Park, hereafter referred to as Vilas Park (1602 Vilas Park Drive), at 45.67 acres, is one of Madison’s oldest parks, dating to the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association era, initially designed in 1905 by landscape architect, O.C. Simonds. It is among the city’s larger lakefront parks.

Vilas Park is located on the near west side of the city and is in close proximity to Edgewood College and Campus School, and to the University of Wisconsin – Madison campus and arboretum (Figure 1.1). The park property includes burial mounds that are a City of Madison Landmark (Landmarked in 1990) and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The property is also home to Henry Vilas Zoo, which is operated by Dane County. The zoo is not a part of the master plan project for Vilas Park (see Figure 1.2).



Figure 1.1. Location Map (Google Maps)

Vilas Park considered a “Community” level park within the park system, within which the most extensive level of services and amenities are typically found. The City of Madison Parks and Open Space Plan defines a community park as

“greater than 20 acres, these parks serve a broader purpose than a neighborhood park. They focus on meeting community-based recreation needs, as well as preserving unique landscapes and open spaces.”¹

¹ City of Madison Parks Division 2018-2023 Park and Open Space Plan



Figure 1.2. Master Plan Study Area

As a “Community” park, Vilas has a service area radius of two miles (Figure 1.3). This area represents a broad cross-section of Madison neighborhoods, including Greenbush, Vilas, Dudgeon-Monroe, Bay Creek, and Burr Oaks. The park is within a 15-minute drive of most of the City of Madison and the surrounding suburbs

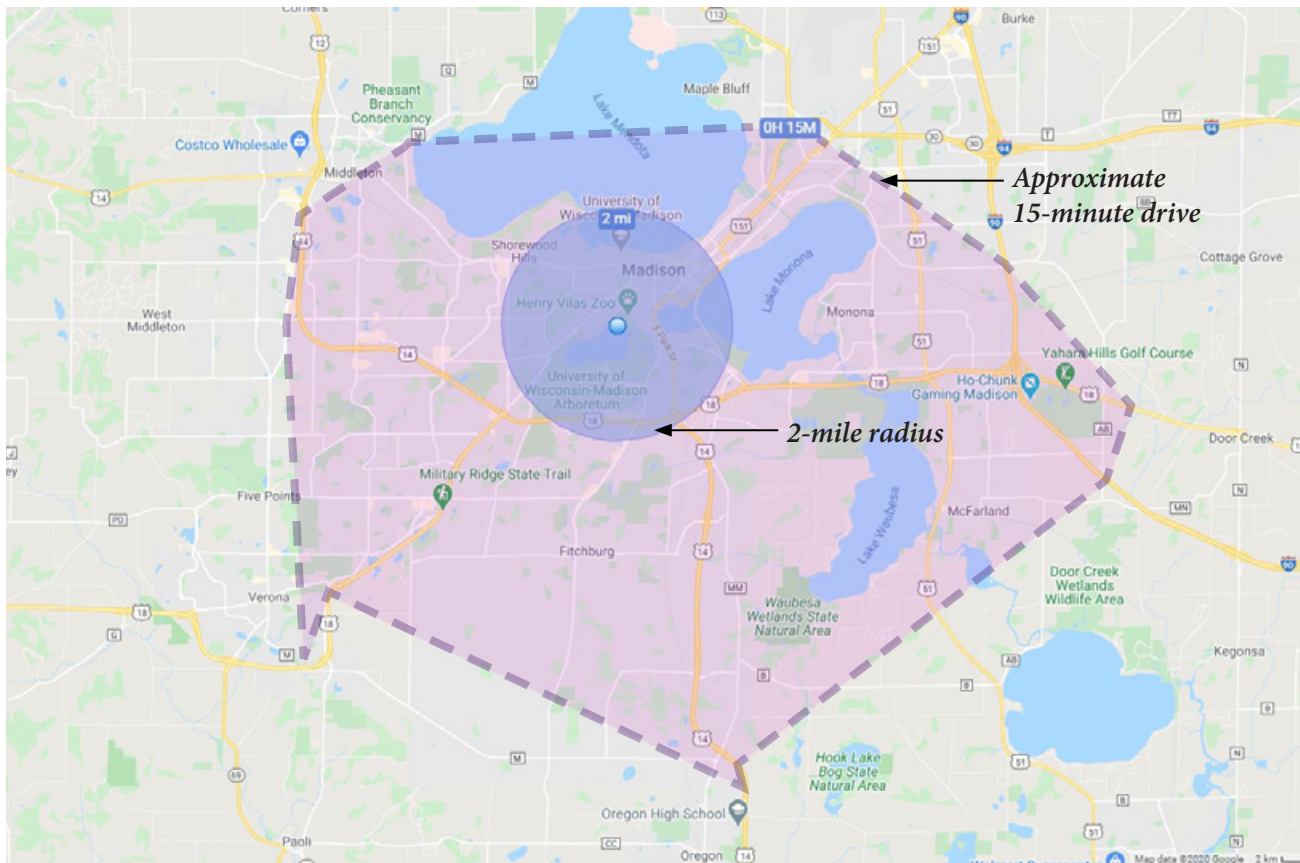


Figure 1.3. Service Area Map (Google Maps)

of Fitchburg, Oregon, Monona, Mcfarland, and Middleton. Additionally, the Henry Vilas Zoo is a regional destination that draws visitor from across Wisconsin and the surrounding Upper Midwest region.

The Vilas Park Existing Park Master Plan (Figure 1.4) further describes the major park features including a reservable all-season shelter, seasonally-operated beach house and swimming beach on Lake Wingra and interior lagoon connected to the lake.

Vilas Park has a variety of programmed and non-programmed activities for all ages. The park is used extensively for informal recreation such as walking, running, Frisbee, kickball, tennis, fishing, ice skating, swimming, picnicking, hammocking, sledding, bird watching, photography kite flying, and cross country skiing. It is also reserved for events and private parties as offering seasonal ice skate rentals.



Figure 1.4. Existing Park Master Plan

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Plan: Phase I

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2. PLANNING PROCESS

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PLANNING PROCESS

The City of Madison Parks Division initiated a Master Plan for Vilas Park to create a framework from which to identify future capital improvement projects after conducting a Racial Equity and Social Justice Initiative (RESJI) analysis to help to inform the Request for Proposals (RFP) process to solicit proposals from eligible consultants in the fall of 2018.

The need for an updated master plan came through the recognition that nearly every built amenity at Vilas Park is reaching (or has already met) the end of its serviceable life.

- Most of the park's infrastructure dates to the early 1960s and is energy inefficient to operate; several key systems are failing (such as the fire hydrants utilized to flood ice skating);
- Multiple pedestrian and vehicle conflicts exist through the park from missing sidewalks (along Vilas Park Drive) and complex or dangerous pedestrian crossings (Drake Street at Randall Avenue and Drake Street at Grant Street/Garfield Street);
- The park's tennis courts have received six rounds of crack filling & resurfacing since 1977 –each with diminishing returns on longevity;
- Roadway and parking lot repairs are long overdue and most of the layouts do not meet current zoning or stormwater standards;
- Playgrounds in the City of Madison Parks system are eligible for replacement beginning at around 20 years - each of the playgrounds at Vilas features equipment dating to 1996 (making it 25 years old in 2021); and features older surfacing and site design standards requiring upgrades to provide a higher level of accessibility and site performance.
- The lagoon bottom has been filling with sediment in since at least the 1960s and is currently very shallow – making it difficult to maintain for ice skating operations and open-water condition which is generally preferable to anglers and for recreational use.

The purpose of the master plan is to identify locations for and describe park improvements to implement design solutions that will enhance the facility to meet the needs and desires of a variety of users. The proposed improvements seek to support a healthy community, and provide aesthetic improvements that instill an inviting and attractive presence for residents, neighboring businesses and visitors alike.

The Vilas Park Master Plan represents input gathered from diverse representatives from the community, regulatory agencies, city staff, and city officials. Online surveys, meetings, focus groups, public gatherings, group discussions and guided the development of a master plan by providing valuable input and collective wisdom.

This master plan provides a framework to make informed decisions, manage maintenance, and guide reconstruction. This report has reviewed the existing conditions and constraints, looking at opportunities and evaluating options to improve and maintain the park over the next 15-20 years. The future of the park developed with this master plan is intended to serve the City of Madison community for the next 50 years or more.

The scope of this project includes the following phases:

- Phase I: Site Analysis and Community Engagement
- Phase II: Design Development - Schematic Park Master Plans
- Phase III: Draft and Final Park Master Plan

Members of the selected consultant team (project team) included:

- MSA Professional Services, Inc. – landscape architecture and master planning, traffic engineering, civil engineering, and public engagement (Phase II and III)
- Urban Assets – public engagement (Phase I and II)
- Quinn Evans – historical site overview

The primary objective of Phase I included site inventory and analysis as well as neighborhood and community engagement, including planning, organizing, and facilitating public events, meetings, focus group discussions, online surveys, open public dialogue inclusive of all residents for an equitable planning process. The engagement process was informed by a thorough review and analysis of the existing conditions at the park and surrounding area and included research into options to make recommendations for traffic calming informed by conducting traffic counts and lagoon improvements and ongoing maintenance.

Additionally, two stakeholder groups were identified to encourage access and input to the process:

- a Resident Resource Group (RRG), which included citizens and organizational representatives from the neighborhoods surrounding Vilas Park including Greenbush and Vilas Neighborhoods.
- a Community Partners Advisory Group (CPAG) which included representatives from organizations that have a vested interest through a common organizational mission, commercial use of the park.

Phase II of the project focused on the development of schematic designs presented as three concepts based on the input received through the public participation efforts and prior analyses and research, including recommendations for location, design, and features of park and recreation elements with a focus on traffic patterns surrounding the various points of entry to the park and its relationship to the adjacent zoo and surrounding neighborhoods.



Phase III involved coalescing public feedback, professional experience and best practices, regulatory requirements and standard park operations related to the preferred concept plans into first a draft master plan and then refined into a final master plan. This document is the outcome of this overall process of planning, design and public engagement.

The analysis and outcomes of each of the phases of the master plan process are defined within the following sections of this report.