A History of the City of Madison Park System

The Dejope (Four Lakes) region in which Madison is situated today was formed by the retreat of glaciers approximately 13,000 years ago. Evidence suggests humans occupied this area starting as early as 300 AD (Historic Madison, Inc., n.d.). By the time European settlers began to arrive, the Ho-Chunk Nation called this area Taychopera (land of four lakes) and considered it their home (Figure 1.1).

In 1829, James Doty visited the Madison area, drew plats for the Four Lakes area and persuaded the territorial legislature to designate Madison as the new capital and name him as its building commissioner (Wisconsin Historical Society). Doty's original plat of Madison included only one public space, a park around the capitol building, but otherwise had ignored opportunities for parks around the lakes (Madison History of a Model City, E Janik). In 1893, the Madison Improvement Association organized with pledge support from the public to pursue tree planting, park development and street and lakeshore beautification. They hired landscape architect Olaf Benson to design parks, boulevards, and walkways for the city, as well as Frank Lloyd Wright to design two public boathouses. Community opposition coupled with the severe economic depression of that era kept many of these projects from ever being realized.

Around the same time as the formation of the Madison Improvement Association, another group of men were collaborating to create Madison's first pleasure drive. This would expand upon a network of farm roads at the University of Wisconsin which were opened to the public in the 1860s. For families and individuals with the means to do so, horse-drawn carriage rides were a popular leisure activity in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the success of the new network led to the formation of the Madison Park and Pleasure Drive Association (MPPDA), in 1894. Shortly thereafter, the MPPDA expanded its reach to meet the interest and need to develop parks and open space within the city. Daniel Tenney led the expansion with his donation of a fourteen-acre parcel near Lake Mendota for a park, and an additional $2,500 donation to the MPPDA.

During the next five years, the acres of parkland within the city expanded from just 3 in 1900 to 154 in 1905. Although the MPPDA effectively served as the city's unofficial parks department, raising private donations to acquire and improve park land, construct additional pleasure drives, and plant` trees and shrubs throughout the city, its founders and particularly its president John Olin recognized that long-term sustainability for a park system would require city involvement. To that end, the common council hired Emil Mische as its first park superintendent to oversee park operations in 1905. In 1909, the common council passed a tax of one half mill (1/20th of a cent) for park purposes, which brought in nearly $50,000 per year over the next ten years.

Just before John Olin's resignation as president of the MPPDA in 1909, the MPPDA engaged the services of the landscape architect John Nolen to prepare a comprehensive plan for the improvement and future growth of the city. Nolen published *Madison: A Model City* in 1911, in which he recommended that the existing 150 acres of parkland and many miles of pleasure drives be expanded into a coordinated system of parks under the responsibility of an official Park Commission. In 1931, the Madison Park Commission (now the Board of Park Commissioners) was created, and the MPPDA transferred full responsibility for the operation, maintenance, and acquisition of all parks and pleasure drives to the City, forming the basis of the parks system we have today.

In 1938, another civic organization, the Trustees of Madison Planning Trust, privately engaged the services of city planner Ladislas Segoe to prepare a comprehensive plan for the city in cooperation with the Madison Park Commission and Plan Commission. This comprehensive plan included a park, playground, and open space system plan. It recommended that the existing 441 acres within 29 parks and two 9-hole municipal golf courses be expanded dramatically to over 1,520 acres in recognition of forecasted urban growth.

The 1950s and 60s served as a period of tremendous growth for the park system, with the creation of several other large community-level parks including Reindahl Park (1956), Rennebohm Park (1958), and Garner Park (1965). In 1961, a Park and Open Space Plan was adopted that recommended preservation of natural drainageways and significant natural areas such as Cherokee Marsh and the Nine Springs wetlands. An emphasis of this plan and subsequent updates was to identify and find ways to minimize deficiencies of parkland in the expanding city. Garner Park was created in 1965, and shortly thereafter, in 1968, a deed from Charles Elver to the City created and named Charles Elver Park, later shortened to Elver Park, which (at nearly 251 acres) is the largest community level park in the system. The municipal golf program also continued to expand during this time, with the addition of the Odana Hills (1957) and Yahara Hills (1968) courses.

The 1970s and 1980s were each significant decades in parkland acquisition for very different reasons. While the 1970s saw nearly 550 acres of parkland added to the system, which was one of the largest decades for acreage of land added, the 1980s saw fewer than 150 acres added. Nonetheless, the land added in the 1980s created 14 neighborhood and mini parks along with a new conservation park (Stricker's Pond) and a new community park (Wexford Ridge).

Several types of large-scale park and open space amenities were added to the system in the 1990s and 2000s to meet the needs of the growing population of Madison: the first disc golf courses were added at Elver Park (1992) and Heistand Park (1997). In 1999, the Warner Park Community Recreation Center was dedicated. Located in Warner Park, the Center serves as a safe, welcoming location providing recreational services for all ages on the Northside. The Center came to fruition due to the fact that Northside residents and businesses contributed much of the energy and funding needed for the project. Madison's first municipal swimming pool became a reality in 2006, when long-time community members and philanthropists Irwin and Robert Goodman kicked off the project by donating $2.8 million to the cause. A combination of City funding, private foundation support, and donations from corporations and individuals secured the remaining amount needed to complete the project.

Recent Developments

The start of the 21st Century brought the introduction of splash pads, the first at Cypress Park in 2009, and two more at Elver and Reindahl Parks in 2015. In 2020, a major policy shift occurred regarding dogs in parks when a revision of an early 1970s prohibition on dogs in parks expanded on-leash dog walking opportunities in the majority of City of Madison parks. The City's first bike park opened in 2022, complete with single track facilities and the Saris Foundation Bike Park paved pump track, in Aldo Leopold Park. The Board of Park Commissioners has focused on providing access to all within the community, supporting the update to accessibility standards for all projects. Furthermore, the city built four inclusive playgrounds in partnership with the Madison Parks Foundation, starting with Brittingham Park in

2017, then continuing to add playgrounds at Elver Park in 2018, and Rennebohm Park and Warner Park, both in 2023. Olbrich Botanical Gardens opened the Frautschi Family Learning Center and new production greenhouses in 2021. Significant progress was made to expand the Ice Age Trail National Scenic Trail connection through the dedication of the Bitzer Family Preserve in 2016 and acquisition of Moraine Woods land in 2018 and 2022. The Ice Age Trail was designated as an official unit of the U.S. National Park Service in 2023. In 2019, 3.65 acres of land that included 450 linear feet of shoreline and an existing office building, was acquired to expand Olin Park. In 2022, the existing office building was repurposed to become the Parks Division Lakeside offices, with a portion of the office and program space leased to Madison School and Community Recreation. Also in 2022, the City of Madison formally attached the Town of Madison, which added three new southside parks to the system, including Fraust Park, Harvey Schmidt Park and Heifetz Park.

Beginning in the 2010's, Madison Parks began responding to the needs of the community by offering more recreational services. The "Sina Davis Movies in the Park" series began in 2019, showing movies throughout the summer at parks in traditionally underserved neighborhoods. The Kids Need Opportunities at Warner (KNOW) Program also started in 2019 to provide recreational and enrichment opportunities for underserved youth. The Parks Alive program started as a pilot program in 2022, utilizing the violence prevention strategies of park space activation and community building around event creation. Parks Alive became a permanent program administered by Madison Parks in 2023. The Parks Alive program focused its activities in neighborhoods in Madison that were supported by Neighborhood Resource Teams. Recreational programming has continued to evolve, and Madison Parks has been offering year-round recreational activities directly and through partnerships with community organizations.

The 2020's brought the beginning of significant transformation within the golf program. In 2022, Glenway Golf Course, originally opened in 1927, was completely redesigned and transformed into The Glen Golf Park, made possible by a generous gift from the Michael and Jocelyn Keiser family. This redesign incorporated a new approach to golf course design and created opportunities for innovative golf park programming approaches. The sale of approximately 232 acres of land at Yahara Hills Golf Course to Dane County in 2022 resulted of a decrease in park acreage, though provided much needed resources for capital reinvestment within the golf program. The sale also resulted in the subsequent reconfiguration of the Yahara Hills Golf Course from a 36 to an 18-hole course, with construction underway in 2024.

The role of parks became far more prevalent in natural disaster and public health emergency response efforts during recent history. In particular, climate change events have brought the role of parks and greenspaces to the forefront of the public conversation on climate resiliency. Over the last five years, Historic flooding (2018), multiple extreme winter weather events, and air quality concerns due to wildfires (2023) have impacted park land and impacted park users. In 2020, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic impacted all aspects of the parks system, as it created significant disruptions to normal services, and required a large allocation of staff resources to manage response efforts effectively. Throughout the pandemic, parks provided safe spaces where residents could safely be with others to find respite and address their physical, mental, social and overall well-being, as evidenced by record numbers of park visitors and golf rounds played.

Through much of this time, the Park and Open Space Plan continued to be updated regularly. Additional Park and Open Space Plans were completed in 1961, 1971, 1977, 1984, 1991, 1997, 2005 (an update to the 1997 plan), 2012, and 2018, and all include recommendations to

address parkland deficiencies (Figure 1.2). Madison Parks has used this plan as a tool to advance the growth of the park system and, over time, has dramatically increased park acreage in total. Madison's historic commitment to public recreation and open space of all kinds provides the public today with a diverse system of parks and open spaces.

Today, the City of Madison Parks Division manages over 280 parks totaling more than 5,700 acres of land (shown on Exhibit 1) and is responsible for over 6,000 acres of public land in total. The additional acreage includes land such as street ends, right-of-ways, and stormwater facilities. The Parks Division is also responsible for the operation and maintenance of special facilities such as Olbrich Botanical Gardens, the Warner Park Community and Recreation Center, the Goodman Pool, four public golf courses, the Forest Hills public cemetery, and the State Street and the Capitol Mall Concourse.

The City of Madison Parks Division and nonprofit Olbrich Botanical Society work together to support and operate the Gardens. This longstanding partnership has played a key role in allowing the Gardens to grow and flourish over the years. Governed by a volunteer Board of Directors, the Society is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit that supports the Gardens through fundraising, programming, education, and a membership program over 8,000 households strong. OBS raises over $3 million each year to keep the Gardens free and accessible to over 340,000 annual visitors.

The Madison Parks Foundation formed in 2002 and is identified as an Affiliated Organization of City of Madison Parks Division, serving as the Division's primary non-profit fundraising collaborator. The Foundation creates and supports initiatives to improve and expand the park lands, facilities, programs and services offered by the City of Madison Parks Division. Since 2013, the Parks Foundation has been an integral partner in several of major projects and programs, including the KNOW Program, The Glen Golf Park and clubhouse redesign, inclusive playgrounds, and the Learn-To Series.