

Vilas Neighborhood Association Comments on and Recommendations for The Draft Vilas Park Master Plan

Approved 12-1-2020

Thank you for providing this opportunity for public comment on the Draft Vilas Park Master Plan. The following is a statement of the Vilas Neighborhood Association on the draft plan, including comments and recommendations based on input from residents of the neighborhood we represent.

The VNA has been involved in the park planning process since its early days. We have two appointed representatives on the Resident Resource Group advising the plan who provided updates at our monthly VNA Council meetings, which neighbors are encouraged to attend. We have solicited input from our neighborhood on key points throughout the process. Our outreach and input have included hosting an in-person neighborhood discussion of issues relating to future of the park in January 2020, soliciting written comments from neighbors on the three design concepts presented in May, and hosting a virtual meeting on the draft plan on November 18, 2020, followed by an invitation to submit written comments. The results of our outreach have been shared with the park planners at each step.

This statement represents a consensus position of the neighborhood in areas where there is widespread agreement, based on response to the draft plan and backed up by results of our earlier outreach efforts. We have not taken a position on those issues where there is insufficient information or where opinion is divided and there is no widespread, general agreement. The absence of an express endorsement of or opposition to any particular feature of the plan should not be taken as implied support; it simply means that we are unable to take a position at this time.

There is much to like in the plan, and there are some significant features that warrant reconsideration. Our comments and recommendations fall into the following categories: (1) support for elements included in the Master Plan; (2) requests for changes to the draft plan; and (3) identification of issues where additional analysis is needed prior to making decisions about what to include in the final plan.

(1) Support for Elements in the Draft Master Plan

The Vilas Neighborhood Association supports the following elements included in the draft Vilas Park Master Plan:

1. Ending commuter and other vehicular through traffic on Vilas Park Drive
2. Maintaining open, flexible use of green space.
3. Improvements to pedestrian and bicyclist safety at the "pinch point" between Lake Wingra and the Zoo
4. Improving walkways that currently suffer from drainage problems
5. Retaining and expanding the Shoe playground
6. Creating a playground at the beach
7. Maintaining ice skating on the lagoon and dredging at least half of the lagoon if needed to improve ice quality and safety.
8. Fixing drainage problems throughout the park.
9. Retaining and improving the tennis courts.
10. Adding bicycle parking and a bus stop to provide alternative ways of accessing the park.

(2) Requested Changes to the Draft Master Plan

The Vilas Neighborhood Association recommends incorporating the following changes to the draft Vilas Park Master Plan:

1. **Retain and improve the Van Buren Street playground**, in addition to the Shoe playground. The current playground is heavily used, and it is good to have separate play areas with different kinds of equipment. Retaining both the Shoe and Van Buren Street playgrounds gives kids choice, allows children to run from one playground to the other, and reduces potential problems such as older children taking over the play space from younger kids or parents and other adult supervisors struggling to keep an eye on their children on a crowded playground.

Reasons given for the proposed removal of the west, or Van Buren Street, playground were more efficient playground maintenance and creation of additional open space for field recreation. With all of the open space in the park, it is not clear that more is needed at this location or would be more worthwhile than the playground it would replace. Nor is it clear that any savings in maintenance costs would be significant.

2. **Remove the proposed parking lot expansion and small picnic shelter west of the tennis courts from the plan** in order to maintain flexible open space in and views of the water from this section of the park. This area is currently used for a variety of activities, including informal small and large group picnics, sunbathing, study groups, kickball, kite flying, and frisbee. In the winter, families with small children use the gentle slope from the walking path for sledding. The proposed parking lot expansion is incompatible with most of these activities. Further, this parking lot is rarely full. There is plenty of unused parking on Vilas Avenue near this area that could be made more attractive to park users by improving one or more of the informal "cut-throughs" from Vilas Avenue to the park.
3. **Remove the relocated north entry to the Park and the Zoo at Drake and Campbell Streets from the plan.** When asked why this change was included in the draft master plan, we were told the current entrance and exit are awkward and would not be designed that way today. However, the argument that the intersections at the current entrance and exit would not be designed that way today is insufficient reason for their replacement. Relocation would create its own traffic problems, including traffic back-ups from drivers turning left into and out of the park and increasing traffic on the smaller streets through the neighborhood and around Bear Mound Park, a sacred burial ground for the Ho-Chunk Nation. If a four-way stop is added at the new entrance/exit, the 4,500+ cars that use Drake St. every day would have to make an additional stop. If only the cross traffic has stop signs, there will be backups into the park at busy times and a risk of pedestrian accidents. The proposed relocation would also eliminate some parking on Drake Street and result in loss of several large trees and underbrush that currently provide a visual buffer between the neighborhood homes and the park.

The current north entrance and exit to the park should be retained until and unless a thorough traffic study comparing the current and proposed alternatives is performed and its results clearly demonstrate that significant safety and traffic flow advantages would result from the relocation.

4. **Remove the eastward expansion of the north parking lot from the plan** to retain green space and trees in the area bordering South Randall Street. Families going to the Zoo use this green space for picnicking, and children play in the area while their parents are unloading or packing up the car. The area also provides an important visual buffer and sound barrier for residents of the homes on South Randall and is home to birds and other wildlife. Parking "lost" by not expanding this lot would be balanced by retaining the diagonal parking along the north exit route from park.
5. **Designate additional shoreline areas to be accessible for informal recreational uses** such as fishing, hammocking, picnics, and just sitting and enjoying unobstructed, close up views of the water. These uses are quite popular, especially since the closure of Vilas Park Drive. The draft master plan includes one viewing node/overlook and one additional fishing pier along the shore. However, we believe that ensuring the Lake Wingra and lagoon shorelines are available for flexible uses, e.g., fishing from the shoreline rather than a pier, the ability to stop and enjoy the view from the shore at any location or picnic at various points along the shore, is very important and not necessarily reflected in the draft master plan. While these uses could potentially take place in a designated "natural area," compatibility is not ensured. We urge that the final Master Plan designate areas along the shores of Lake Wingra and the lagoon where plantings will be selected and maintained in a manner that facilitates the above listed activities.

(3) Requests for Additional Data and Analysis to Identify Options and Inform Decisions about the Park Design

Further analysis is needed in order to provide a solid, evidence-based foundation for making decisions regarding the following key elements in the Master Plan:

1. **The Lagoon.** Not enough data has been provided to determine what options are feasible for the future of this key feature of the park. Vilas residents have raised a number of questions about the lagoon and its health that are cannot be answered with the information available. In particular, but not exclusively, what are the benefits of dredging and how will it affect ice skating, what is the best option for the water quality in the lagoon, what effect will the different lagoon options have on Lake Wingra, how would the conversion to wetland occur in the eastern half of the lagoon, and how will climate change impact the lagoon? Answers to these questions, and many others, will be important in making decisions about the lagoon.
2. **Shelter Location.** The proposed shelter location brings two-way traffic through much of the peninsula area of the park and creates a conflict for pedestrians and bicyclists

coming over the bridge from the island. Rather than being able to complete a circuit within the park's green space, path users coming over the bridge must navigate an area dominated by the paved access road and parking serving the shelter area. The plan for the lagoon will affect where the shelter can be located. A better understanding of the lagoon options may mean that the shelter could be placed in a different location, where the length of the access road could be reduced, consistent with park users' desire to minimize traffic and paved areas in the park. We recommend that the final decision regarding the shelter location be deferred until issues with the lagoon have been analyzed and resolved and alternative locations for the shelter have been considered with the new information in mind.

3. **Drainage.** Residents are enthusiastic about the possibility of installing drainage tiles or other mechanisms to dry out low-lying, poorly drained areas in the park and make them more usable for recreational purposes. Is this option feasible? If not, would it be feasible use fill to solve the problem instead? Could dredged material from the lagoon be used for this purpose? What contaminants are contained in the muck at the bottom of the lagoon and would they preclude the potential for use as fill?
4. **Natural areas.** Residents are concerned that the natural areas on the draft master plan will restrict the use of these spaces by park users. They have many questions, including: what types of vegetation are planned for the portions of the park that the plan designates as "natural areas" along the shoreline and in the meadow area south of the tennis courts? What benefits will they bring to the park and how will they affect park use? How will the natural areas be maintained to prevent weeds and invasive species from degrading them? There is particular concern about the planned natural areas along the Lake Wingra shoreline and that these natural areas not negatively affect the ability of park users to fish, hammock, and enjoy views from the shoreline.
5. **Pathways.** One of the most popular activities in the park is walking. While residents are pleased about the preservation of existing paths, they have questions about the proposed new paths, including: how wide will the pathways be and what surface materials will be used? To what extent do the proposed paths reflect "desire lines" where users currently walk without formal paths? How will other uses such as hammocking and cross country skiing be affected by the location of pathways?
6. **Parking.** Parking is an important issue that merits a thorough study that results in reasonable options for all park users. While parking capacity under the draft plan is approximately the same as what is currently available, the proposed expansion of the existing north, west and southeast parking lots and the corresponding loss of green space in those areas of the park is a major concern. Open space is a precious resource in our growing and increasingly dense city environment. Data on the capacity and use of parking spaces both in and within one-quarter mile of the park should be included in the parking study, and alternatives to the proposed parking lot expansions should be explored. These could include the feasibility of adding bus service and other alternative

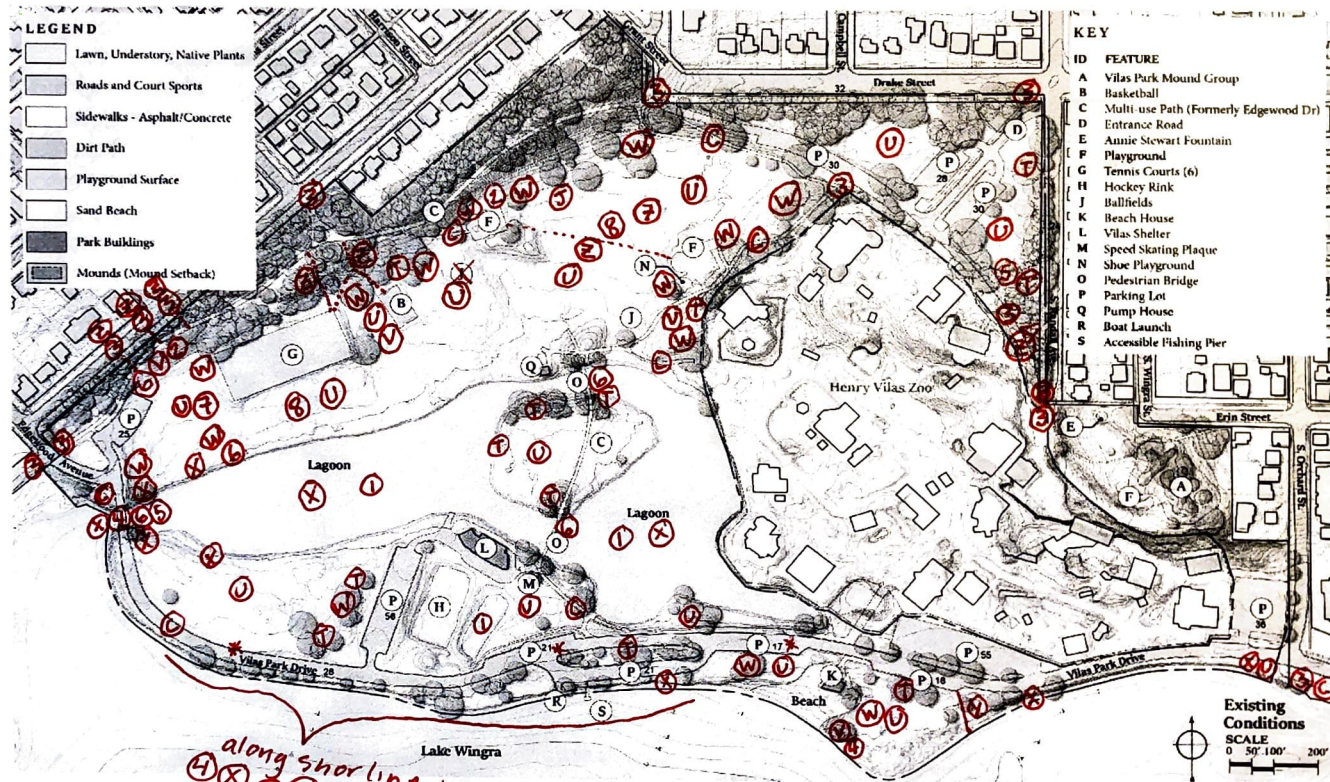
modes of transportation for accessing the park, evaluating the availability of on street parking within walking distance of the park, and options for ensuring access to parking for those who need it most.

7. **Additional Uses of the Park.** Neighbors have identified a number of current park uses that were not referenced in the draft plan. These include hammocking, bird watching, cross country skiing, sledding, and other informal activities. The open skating rink adjacent to the hockey rink was also not included in the draft plan. A map of the existing park conditions with handwritten additions highlighting the locations of these various activities is attached to this statement for your information. Please take these activities into account and do what you can to avoid potential conflicts with other proposed uses as the plan is finalized. try

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the plan. We hope you find these recommendations useful in finalizing the Master Plan and look forward to participating in future community input activities as the plan moves forward and is implemented.

Attachment: *Map of Existing Conditions and Uses at Vilas Park, 11/2/2020*

Map of Existing Conditions and Uses at Vilas Park, 11/28/2020**



key cont'd

- ⑦ Hammocking
- ⑩ open-Flex-REC Space
- ⑪ Overlooks
- ⑫ Flex picnic Space
- ⑬ Fishing
- ⑭ Paved path
- ⑮ Grass path
- ⑯ Skating
- ⑰ Sledding
- ⑱ Pedestrian access points
- ⑲ sunset viewing
- ⑳ Bird watching
- ㉑ Photography
- ㉒ Kite flying
- ㉓ Cross country skiing

* During motor-vehicle restriction:

- Strollers
- Skateboarding
- Scootering
- Running
- Walking
- Biking
- Carting canoes, kayaks, paddle boards
- Wheelchairs
- Walkers

**Handwritten additions represent uses observed by Vilas area residents and not shown on the Existing Conditions Map in the Draft Vilas Park Master Plan.