

Vilas Neighborhood Association Comments on and Recommendations for the Vilas Park Master Plan

Approved 2-16-21

Thank you for providing this opportunity for public comment on the Vilas Park master plan. The following is a statement of the Vilas Neighborhood Association (VNA) on the plan, based on input from residents of the neighborhood we represent.

The VNA has been actively involved in the park planning process since the beginning. We have two representatives on the Resident Resource Group advising the planning team and have kept neighbors informed and sought input throughout. We previously submitted comments on the draft master plan, which we wish to reiterate as many of our points are still relevant for the final master plan. A copy of our December comments is attached to this email. In this set of comments, we outline the design features we support in the final draft plan and then turn to make recommendations on issues we think are the most pressing.

Support for Elements in the Master Plan

We wish to express our appreciation for two important changes made to the initial draft master plan, one to eliminate the eastward expansion of the north parking lot near the Zoo entrance and the other to restore the playground near the foot of Van Buren Street.

In addition, the VNA continues to support the following elements included in the final draft master plan:

1. Ending commuter and other vehicular through traffic on Vilas Park Drive.
2. Maintaining open, flexible use of green space.
3. Improvements for pedestrian and bicyclist safety.
4. Retaining and expanding the Shoe playground
5. Maintaining ice skating on the lagoon and dredging at least half of the lagoon, if needed to improve water and ice quality and safety.
6. Fixing drainage problems throughout the park.
7. Retaining and improving the tennis courts.
8. Adding bicycle parking and a bus stop to provide alternative ways of accessing the park.

Recommendations

The VNA recommends incorporating the following changes to the Vilas Park master plan:

- 1. 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. No evidence has been presented to suggest that anyone's experience of Vilas Park will be enhanced by this change. At the same time, there are potential negative impacts that have also not been thoroughly explored.

We have tried and failed to find any concrete evidence of a safety concern related to the current Zoo entrance and exit that would justify their relocation. For example, according to data from Traffic Engineering, this stretch of Drake Street has experienced an average of only 0.5 crashes over three years. And the intersections at the current entrance and exit are not on the city's list of intersections with high accident rates.

Relocation of the entrance would create its own traffic problems. If a four-way stop is added at the new entrance/exit, the 4,200+ cars that use Drake St. every day would have to make an additional stop, inconveniencing drivers and creating backups. If only Campbell Street and the relocated exit have stop signs, traffic will back-up from drivers turning left into and out of the park at busy times, and there will be a greater risk of pedestrian accidents as people cross Drake Street at the new entrance location en route to the park. And traffic may increase on the smaller streets through the neighborhood. For these reasons, a more thorough and compelling traffic analysis is needed to justify the proposed change.

We are also concerned about the lack of information regarding the potential impact of the relocated entrance on sites of archaeological and cultural value. The proposed Campbell Street entrance is located on a site that was identified as possibly containing partial effigy mounds and burial remains in a 2018 archaeological investigation of Vilas Park. In addition, traffic pattern changes resulting from the entrance relocation could potentially detract from Bear Mound Park, a sacred burial ground for the Ho-Chunk Nation that is located one block away at Campbell Street. These potential impacts should be explored if relocation remains on the table.

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.

We made this recommendation in our December 2020 public comments, and, while the final master plan modified the plans for this section of the park, we maintain that the revised plan is still incompatible with how this area is used. This area is currently used for a variety of activities, including small and large informal 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 and picnic shelter reduce the amount of open space in the area and are incompatible with most of these activities and is, in our view, unnecessary. The current parking lot is rarely full, and there is plenty of unused parking nearby on Vilas Avenue 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. The proposed open shelter with 3-4 picnic tables would further reduce usable open space in this already constrained area and obstruct with views of the water.

3. Create a playground near the beach, as included in the initial draft master plan.

Vilas Park is a major park with attractions that bring people from throughout the city and region in addition to serving residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. Because of its location, many of the 750,000 people who visit the Henry Vilas Zoo each year also spend time enjoying Vilas Park. Both Vilas Park and the Zoo are frequent destinations for school trips, child care programs, and summer day camps. Vilas Park is large enough and has a high enough volume of visitors to support

three playgrounds. As we commented in December, VNA supports creating a playground at the beach, in addition to the two playgrounds included in the current version of the Master Plan.

4. Conduct a more thorough analysis of options for the lagoon before finalizing decisions about related park features.

The lagoon is a central feature of Vilas Park. Decisions about the shelter location, ice skating, and the length of the proposed two-way road through the south part of the park all depend on the plan for the lagoon. As a result, it is vital to have a thorough understanding of the best option for the lagoon before undertaking other key renovations at Vilas Park. However, limited analysis of what is best for the lagoon or the plan's impact on Lake Wingra has occurred. There has been no exploration of what remedies exist for the poor water quality in the lagoon, a frequent complaint of park visitors, or of what impact plan implementation will have on water quality. Available data is insufficient to determine what options are feasible for the future of this key feature of the park. A number of questions have been raised about the lagoon and its health that are cannot be answered with the information available: What are the benefits of dredging and how will it affect aquatic life in the lagoon? 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? Answers to these questions, and many others, will be important in making decisions about the lagoon and related park components.

5. Include language in the plan that provides flexibility about the location of proposed park features pending further analysis of the Park's potential archaeological and cultural value.

The area around Lake Wingra, including what is now Vilas Park, was once a place of spiritual importance and ceremonial activity for the Woodland culture from which the Ho Chunk tribe is descended, as evidenced by a rare and unusually dense collection of ancient effigy mounds. Later, into the early 19th century, the area that is now Vilas Park was the site of a historic Ho Chunk village. Many of the mounds and other archaeological remains were destroyed as the area developed. To this day, a large and clearly visible effigy mound sits atop the Wingra Overlook in Vilas Park. We appreciate the consideration given to the mounds in the Wingra Overlook area and urge continued consideration and coordination with the Ho Chunk and other relevant parties regarding the appropriate use of this area. However, there are significant archeological and sacred sites in the rest of Vilas Park as well, including but not limited to the location of the proposed Campbell Street entrance. VNA is concerned about how little discussion and analysis there has been of respectful and appropriate treatment of these areas. In order to protect and honor this important cultural heritage, we recommend that the master plan include provision for archaeological analysis to determine the presence or absence of archaeological resources prior to finalizing the location of specific park features and conducting more detailed design work for the improvements called for in the master plan.

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