

Greenbush Neighborhood Association Statement on Final Vilas Park Master Plan¹

February 17, 2021

1. Vilas Park Drive

GNA strongly supports:

- a. The Vilas Park Drive design proposed in Vilas Master Plan. This aspect of the VMP has overwhelming support from throughout the City and is seen by many as the most important recommendation for improving the vibrancy and diverse use of the park.
- b. A shorter-term interim plan: During the interim years before the design recommended by the Vilas Master Plan can be implemented, motor traffic access to the park on Vilas Park Drive should be rerouted to eliminate through traffic (such as in "[Alternative Concept 2](#)" developed by Traffic Engineering, which extends 2-way traffic from the east as far west as the shelter parking lot but does not allow motor traffic from the west), in order to increase safety and open more of the shoreline area for multiple park uses.

There is strong public support, not for only a Master Plan which eliminates through motor traffic in the long-term, but also in the shorter term. A Joint Neighborhood Statement (June 20, 2020) to Parks from the Greenbush, Vilas, and Dudgeon-Monroe Neighborhood Associations urged "that the final master plan not only include rigorous pedestrian and bicyclist safety features but also prioritize near-term funding for such features." A recent [petition](#) asking to keep the motor vehicle restriction on pass-through traffic on Vilas Park Drive in the short-term gained well over 500 signatures. Our recent on-line survey of Greenbush residents demonstrated nearly unanimous support for some version of Traffic Engineering's Alternative Concept 2, despite some concerns that it does not go far enough to separate motor traffic from pedestrians, bicyclists, and other park users throughout the entire length of the drive.

2. Wingra Overlook²

Because of significant limitations imposed by the planning process on GNA's ability to respond in an effective and timely way (see "Background and Rationale" below for details), GNA asks that the Master Plan explicitly identify the need for flexibility in future options for the Wingra Overlook area (including a small playground, walkway locations, etc.), recognizing that final effective decision-making requires additional community engagement that considers:

- Protecting and honoring the mounds and the perspectives offered by the Ho-Chunk
- Options for continued Greenbush Neighborhood access to a small, toddler-friendly play area
- Future of the Annie Stewart Memorial Fountain (which impact other planning decisions on Wingra Overlook)

¹ This statement was developed by Jim Lorman (Greenbush Neighborhood Association representative to the VMP Resident Resource Group) in consultation with the Greenbush Neighborhood Council based on neighborhood input from a series of online neighborhood surveys conducted Jan 22-Feb 8 and a follow-up Greenbush Neighborhood Association meeting on Feb 8.

² GNA has chosen to use "Wingra Overlook" to designate the portion of Vilas Park bounded by Erin, Orchard, Drake, and Vilas Zoo, consistent with recommendations from the 2008/2010 Greenbush Neighborhood Plan to "explore renaming" this area to reflect its "separate use and identity from the rest of Vilas Park."

3. Beach playground

GNA supports a playground at the beach, as proposed in the final draft Master Plan but removed in the final plan that was released to the public less than 2 weeks ago. We believe this is an important equity issue - the beach clearly has the most demographically diverse usage of any area of Vilas Park, and the last-minute decision to favor a playground at the existing west location near Van Buren over one at the beach seems to have been made without appropriate application of the City's [RESJI tool](#).

GNA also does not agree with Park's decision to provide only two playgrounds in the entire park; and we believe that setting up a choice between the above two sites (while also eliminating Greenbush's current nearby access to a small playground) is arbitrary and unfair. The master plan is a blueprint for the future without specific funding commitments;³ and there are many options for funding more than two playgrounds in the long term.

4. Other

The GNA shares concerns articulated in Vilas Neighborhood Association's 12-1-20 statement (<http://tinyurl.com/VNA-statement>), and also in their newer (Feb 16, 2021) statement (The Greenbush Neighborhood Council sent a memo to MSA and Parks on 12-4-20 supporting the earlier VNA statement.)

One recommendation in those VNA statements for which there is not a clear GNA consensus is eliminating the proposed new north park entrance from the Master Plan. Most of us agree that the current entrance, exit, and traffic flow is problematic, and the proposed new entrance has some positive features; but GNA shares VNA's belief that the proposed new entrance should not move forward without a) a detailed traffic study, and b) further consultation with Bill Quackenbush (Ho-Chunk Tribal Historic Preservation Officer) and Larry Johns (Oneida effigy mounds expert) on the potential impact of the new entrance on nearby effigy mounds.

Background and Rationale for GNA Statement on Wingra Overlook

GNA asks that the Vilas Master Plan explicitly identify the need for flexibility in future options for the Wingra Overlook area. We are not comfortable with any implication that all decisions related to this part of the park incorporated into the plan are final, and we ask that the plan clearly stipulate that special circumstances exist which mean that these decisions are understood as tentative and specifically open to future amendment after much-needed further community engagement.

In particular, GNA believes that, before implementation is considered and budgets are developed related to the Wingra Overlook part of Vilas Park, additional inclusive community engagement is needed that judiciously takes into consideration:

- Protecting and honoring the mounds and the perspectives offered by the Ho-Chunk

³ At the final Community Information Meeting (2-4-21), Dan Williams (principle on this project for MSA Professionals) suggested that a "placeholder" could be provided for the playground at the beach; GNA believes that the appropriate way to do this is to add it back in to the graphic that represents the final Vilas Park Master Plan.

- Options for continued Greenbush Neighborhood access to a small, toddler-friendly play area
- Decisions on the future of the Annie Stewart Memorial

Because we understand that this is a somewhat challenging request, we are providing relevant background and rationale here, organized in two categories:

1. Special qualities of the Wingra Overlook and of Greenbush Neighborhood’s relationship with it
2. Limitations imposed by the park master planning process

Special qualities of the Wingra Overlook and of Greenbush Neighborhood’s relationship with it

The Wingra Overlook has historical, cultural, physical features which make it extraordinary. It provides an exceptional view overlooking Lake Wingra from a distance. It is the only remnant of the “Dividing Ridge,” a glacial moraine that, until about 1910, rose 80 feet and extended a half mile between Lakes Wingra and Monona ([Historic Madison: Dividing Ridge](#)). About 30 effigy mounds once on the Dividing Ridge have been lost, but eight mounds remain on the Wingra Overlook, including an impressive bird effigy. The area includes the 1925 Annie C. Stewart Memorial Fountain which is of historic and artistic importance and in great need of protection/restoration. This park also contains a small dinosaur-themed play area, well-loved for its quiet setting and particular friendliness to younger children. Greenbush neighbors have long appreciated having close access to a park area with these extraordinary qualities, and we have long supported efforts aimed at protecting, highlighting, and enhancing them.

To be clear: GNA fully understands that the Wingra Overlook area is part of a larger community park and we do *not* assume (as has been inferred by Parks staff⁴) that our preferences should necessarily take priority over those of the larger community, or that decisions that are not concordant with our requests are necessarily due to a flawed process. We understand that decisions about public spaces frequently involve trade-offs and potentially conflicting views of different parties, often between local users and the uses of the larger community. Nevertheless, we strongly believe that it is appropriate for park planning, design, and on-going management decisions to recognize the special relationship that Greenbush residents have with this park area, including our demonstrated commitment to stewardship.

The Wingra Overlook is within the Greenbush Neighborhood, somewhat secluded and isolated from the rest of Vilas Park; and it is natural that Greenbush neighbors have long effectively used it as a readily-accessible neighborhood park, similar to the way “mini-parks” are used across the City. For years, Greenbush has held a neighborhood potluck in this area on Memorial and Labor Days. Neighbors created and continue to maintain a flower garden within a sidewalk triangle; we have worked with retired parks planner Si Widstrand and retired head of parks maintenance Jon Sundby to

⁴ This implication has been made throughout the planning process by different Parks staff. For example, Kate Kane wrote in an email (Nov 30, 2020): “I believe there is an assumption that residents living closest to the park can expect to have more say in the decision-making aspects of the master plan. They feel that if their recommendations or requests are not reflected in the design that there is a flaw in the process.” This view is unfortunately part of an apparent tendency to assume that input from neighbors is based solely on self-interest, and it does not give due credit to the appreciation and commitment that many neighbors have to equity, fairness, and good participatory process in decision-making. This view also tends to dismiss all critiques of process as invalid even if they are not.

manage invasive vegetation in the wooded areas; we have proactively called attention to damage done by large mowers (and other activities) to the effigy mounds and subsequently volunteered to mow them ourselves using push mowers; and we have been instrumental in efforts to protect and restore the Annie C. Stewart Memorial Fountain.

The longer-term importance of this area to Greenbush is demonstrated by the [2008/2010 Greenbush Neighborhood plan](#), which made several recommendations for the Wingra Overlook (table on p. 52 of that document) pertinent to Master Plan issues:

Erin & Wingra Park Recommendation	Rationale	Lead Implementation
9. Explore renaming a portion of Vilas Park located at the Erin and Wingra Street Intersection.	This open space has a separate use and identity from the rest of Vilas Park. A separate name would help to develop an identity for this part of the neighborhood and promote neighborhood support of the park.	Parks Division
10. Preserve the effigy mounds in the park with appropriate native plantings.	Many neighborhood residents familiar with this park said that the mounds were important for the park and should be treated respectfully.	Parks Division
11. Selectively trim trees and eliminate invasive brush species such as honeysuckle in the park to open a view of Lake Wingra on the south side of the park.	Toward the south side of the park, a number of invasive plant species have created a thicket that collects trash and obliterates the view of Lake Wingra.	Parks Division
12. Work together to replant new trees of appropriate native species to replace the ones recently lost in the park.	Summer shade makes this park a popular destination, and several of the trees in this park are over 100 years old.	Parks Division
13. Work with Parks Division to conduct a large participatory process for deciding the fate of the Annie Stewart Memorial fountain. If the Annie Stewart Memorial fountain is relocated, the Parks Division and GNA should work together to find an attractive feature, such as a planter or new artwork, to replace it.	Annie Stewart fountain is one of the oldest remaining fountains in Madison. Neighborhood residents were indecisive on what should happen to the fountain, but many said that it deserved to be preserved in one way or another. If it remains as it is for another decade or two, it may not be salvageable for display anywhere. If the Annie Stewart Memorial fountain were relocated, providing a new artwork would preserve this as a special corner of the City.	GNA in conjunction with Parks Division

Regarding #9 in that table: As noted in a footnote above, GNA’s choice to use “Wingra Overlook” to designate this portion of Vilas Park is consistent with our earlier recommendation to “explore renaming” this area to reflect its “separate use and identity from the rest of Vilas Park.” While GNA is not advocating for such a name change at this time, we believe that consideration should be given to that idea within the 15-20 year scope addressed by the Vilas Master Plan, and as part of other considerations addressed here that we feel should be explored further in the relatively near-term.

Regarding #10 in the above table: As noted above, Greenbush residents have long acted to respect and protect the effigy mounds. Several of “key recommendations” in our March 2020 report, “Vilas Park Master Plan Community Input: Results of Engagement with the Greenbush Neighborhood” ([Greenbush Neighborhood recommendations](#), p. 2) were based on the “broad, strongly felt, and emotionally expressed agreement within GNA to protect and enhance” and provide “interpretive features” that would highlight the historical and cultural heritage of the mounds.

In an attempt to support and help implement these recommendations, GNA developed and submitted a City Planning Grant proposal, “Highlighting the Heritage of the Wingra Overlook” (<https://tinyurl.com/GNAPlanningProposal>) in March 2020. This project proposed to advance community engagement helpful to the Vilas Master Plan process by:

- Creating “new neighborhood connections while enhancing a cherished but often overlooked park space, through placemaking that builds upon that area’s special features.”
- Helping to “catalyze next steps for working toward additional neighborhood recommendations”

- “Creatively tap[ping] into the collective wisdom of the community through participatory processes...that engage neighbors (including artists and builders), as well as Ho-Chunk representatives...”

Unfortunately, the GNA proposal was not funded and therefore these proposed community engagement activities that could have supported the Master Plan process did not occur.⁵

Limitations imposed by the park master planning process

Greenbush residents have not been consistently provided sufficient and timely opportunity to engage collectively on key issues and to respond effectively to rapidly-changing and/or poorly communicated successive versions of plans and rationales for decisions. Such limitations are key reasons for our request that additional engagement opportunities be provided before long-term decisions on the Wingra Overlook are finalized. These process limitations are in part a result of the pandemic (which MSA and Parks acknowledge to have created special challenges in ensuring timely and effective communications) and in part due to the loss of Urban Assets (initially contracted to provide expertise in public engagement) from the project.⁶

Information on the historical location of effigy mounds and on input from Ho-Chunk, with impacts on decisions related to the playground and the location of walkways, were conveyed to us late and without complete details⁷. Also, the exclusion from the Master Plan process of the Annie Stewart Fountain has made it difficult to determine how the various elements of the plan for that area might fit together.⁸ Similarly, we have received confusing information about the need for, and specific location of, an “emergency access” that would create a new drive from the north parking lot to open opposite houses on South Randall Ave.⁹

⁵ Parks staff were aware of, and expressed explicit written support for, this GNA project initiative as we were developing and submitting the proposal, with full understanding that the project would occur concurrently with Vilas master planning. However, funding for the proposal was later rejected, following communications from Parks staff to Planning staff that surprisingly deemed the project “premature” because the Vilas Master Plan was not complete.

⁶ A reason that Urban Assets provided for withdrawing from their contract in fall 2019 was their conclusion that Parks “Staff is not committed to, or comfortable with, community engagement.” This is a troubling conclusion, yet one shared by others with significant public engagement expertise.

⁷ The location of the walkway connecting Wingra Overlook to the rest of Vilas Park as proposed in the final plan is very different from any of the three options presented in the three draft concepts, and this change was not brought to our attention at the time, nor was a rationale for this change provided until a few weeks ago (Jan 26). GNA has not had time to properly review this new proposed sidewalk alignment, and it is not clear that its new location avoids the kind of conflict with effigy mounds that has been provided as justification for removing the nearby play equipment.

⁸ We consider the decision to exclude the Annie C. Stewart Memorial Fountain from consideration in the Vilas Master Plan to be a mistake. This sculpture has been long-neglected and in need of a concerted planning effort involving the public (see GNA recommendation from 2008 listed as #13 in the table on previous page), and its future has an important effect on other aspects of planning for the Wingra Overlook. Surprisingly, since the Fountain had been excluded from discussion, the Draft Final Master Plan made public on 11-16-20 proposed that the Fountain be re-located to the pedestrian entrance at Drake and Randall. This proposal was later reversed, but caused considerable confusion in the meantime. Since then, Greenbush residents have helped led the formation of a new informal group (<https://groups.io/g/AnnieStewartFountain>) to consider options for the fountain and its relationship to the Vilas Master Plan.

⁹ Dan Williams of MSA said at the Feb 4 public information meeting that the emergency access was necessary because it was requested by the Fire Department; but, in response to citizen questions, the Fire Marshall has since written that it is only “on the plan as an option or placeholder” not a specific requirement.

Regarding the “dinosaur” playground, our [Jan 2020 GNA report](#) recommended (pp. 12-13) it be kept mostly as is: “...most prefer to keep this area for smaller children as there are options for older children in the main areas of Vilas Park.” We were informed (later in the planning process) that as a result of advice to the City from a Ho-Chunk tribal representative (<https://www.cityofmadison.com/sites/default/files/city-of-madison/parks/documents/VPMP%20THPO%20Minutes%205-14-2020.pdf>), and also as a result of the Park staff’s decision to limit Vilas to two playgrounds, the final Vilas Park Master Plan proposes to remove this playground whenever the equipment “is identified by City staff as no longer meeting required safety standards” (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/867fcb3bf7384270942a12def6e6d77a>).

Our subsequent neighborhood engagement over the last few weeks has confirmed that, while Greenbush residents are overwhelmingly committed to honoring Ho-Chunk perspectives on what it means to honor the heritage of this area, we very much value access to a small playground like what is there now, and we wish to explore where and how it might be appropriate to provide similar access nearby.