

July 16th 2008

Same name and spelling corrections motion to approve by Commissioner Brannon and seconded by Commissioner Schmidt, all ayes with one abstention.

V. UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA CAPSTONE PROJECT

Ginny Gaynor reported on the University of Minnesota Capstone Project. Students are doing nine projects for the City of Maplewood based on the theme of sustainable Maplewood. The projects include; parks, stormwater and surface water management, public area vegetation, green workplace models, connectivity with adjacent neighbors and environmental education.

Ms. Gaynor introduced the students from the University of Minnesota and explained that they are going to look at Maplewood's neighborhood parks to get a better understanding of park use. They will investigate how residents are using the parks and whether the parks are meeting the needs of residents. They will also look at if there are areas in the parks that can be transitioned into natural vegetation.

One of the students asked for the commissioners' opinion on whether they would like a survey of information on who uses the parks, why they use them, or if they prefer some other medium such as a public discussion. He also asked the commission whether certain areas would be suitable for dog parks.

Questions and Discussion:

Commissioner Sonnek asked how long the will students be working with the city.

Ms. Gaynor answered the project will be completed in December.

Commissioner Binko likes the idea of a survey. We have talked about the changing demographics of Maplewood. She would like to hear from the students about park use and what residents are using and not using.

One of the students stated that their focus would be on usability. If residents are not using some parts of the park then those parts might be converted to vegetation such as prairie grass cover or rain gardens or volunteer community gardens to beautify the park. They will also look at demographics.

Commissioner Sonnek asked what kind of methodology they are considering.

The students are open to suggestions. They have looked at several options.

VI. CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Ginny Gaynor reviewed the memo that was prepared for meeting. She asked the commission if they supported the city entering into conservation easements for Jim's Prairie and the Priory Neighborhood Preserve. She also discussed the management plan for Jim's Prairie.

Commissioner Christianson asked for an explanation of the comment on the Jim's Prairie easement that "the site will be managed for habitat for wildlife."

Ms. Gaynor responded that means if we cannot manage the site for its biological diversity, we would have discussions with Minnesota Land Trust (MLT) and make a joint decision on whether to change the management goal to just managing for wildlife habitat. Ms. Gaynor estimates managing Jim's Prairie will cost the city \$500-\$1000 annually. In addition, it would be nice to put some money up front for improvement on buffers. The maintenance and stewardship fee for the easements (for enforcement of the easement) is \$25,000 for the two sites combined.

Ms. Gaynor mentioned that another change regarding Jims Prairie is that the easement will be written to allow for trails.

Ms. Gaynor discussed what would be covered in the Acts Beyond Owners Control section.

Ms. Gaynor stated if the Comprehensive Plan passes, we will have more protection for our open space sights than we currently have. She asked the commissioners if these two sites deserve even more protection. If the commission wants to ensure that these particular sites are never developed, conservation easement is the tool to do that. Ms. Gaynor asked the commissioners to review, discuss and make a recommendation for each site individually on whether there should be a conservation easement on these sites. In addition, she mentioned that Mark Gernes from the Open Space Advisory Panel was present to participate in the discussion.

Commissioner Fischer asked what other Open Space Advisory Panels members thought about the easements.

Ms. Gaynor indicated that advisor Jack Frost commented he did not think conservation easements were necessary. He would prefer that the money be spent on site restoration and management.

Mark Gernes, member of Open Space Advisory Task Force, stated the biggest threat for Jim's Prairie and Priory is lack of management. We need to put money into the preserves.

Ms. Gaynor stated that if we only do one easements, the \$25,000 fee would be reduced but not cut completely in half. Staff is requesting a recommendation for each of these preserves independently.

Commissioner Binko asked if there would be a guarantee for maintenance on the prairie.

Ms. Gaynor responded when we send this to City Council we will be making a recommendation on what budget the \$25,000 is taken from.

A suggestion was made that if money is appropriated to protect the Priory, whatever is remaining, should be put in an endowment so it is tied up and is generating money for long-term management.

Mr. Konewko explained that general levy monies are being used. Funding for open space management is subject to budget discussions each year. The CIP plan allocates \$50,000 a year for open space improvements over the next few years.

Commissioner Brannon responded that future taxpayers will be paying for this decision without any possibility for a vote. How we spend our city money will be a right given to someone else, without a way to vote them out.

Commissioner Christianson stated that we are still a democracy. His concern is that Maplewood has one of the premier park systems in the U.S. We were one of the first to set aside money for open space. To take a premier open space, the Priory, and give it to someone else to control, to give our privilege to make decisions on it to someone else forever seems like we are giving up our duties on this property. We are giving up a right to these properties. Control would be taken away from citizens and the City and City Council. Decisions made by an outside party may be counterintuitive to ours.

Commissioner Schmidt thinks the Priory and Jim's Prairie do deserve more protection. Our money is a limited resource and she wonders if it would be better to put it into management. What's the best way to spend our money? If we don't buy the easement do we get to use the \$25,000?

Mr. Konewko responded that the City Council would make the decision on the funds. The City Council has approved \$50,000 in the CIP targeted for improvements to open space sites.

Ms. Gaynor commented that the two sites are very different. She is not worried about the city being able to comply with the easement for the Priory in terms of management. It comes down to commission and council's desire to restrict the use of that property forever.

Commissioner Peterson commented that she would like to tour Jim's Prairie. She agrees with what Ginny is saying regarding putting the preservation easement on the Priory. She does not believe Jim's Prairie would be in danger of development.

Mr. Gernes commented that Jim's Prairie ecologically is a wet prairie. He wondered if the conservation easement is only going to protect the area within the property boundary. He questioned off-site impacts.

Ms. Gaynor responded that acts beyond the owners control are covered in the easements. The land trust added a second clause enabling us to manage for wildlife if we are not able manage for a diverse wet prairie community.

Mr. Gernes feels we do not gain additional protection if the feed supply business to the west sells their property. Redevelopment of that site has the potential of impacting Jim's Prairie and it doesn't sound like a conservation easement would give us further protection from those offsite impacts.

Mr. Konewko responded that Mark Gernes is correct. The conservation easement does not control the land around the perimeter around Jim's Prairie.

Commissioner Fischer asked if we think the city will be able to maintain the property or if we think we need to pay an outside group to force the city to make sure the sites are maintained in a proper way. He does not know what it is going to be like 20 years from now. Is this the best use of the money we have right now?

Mr. Konewko responded it is City Council's decision to ultimately decide where those proceeds will come from.

Commissioner Fischer stated that the PAC funds used for this project (\$33,000) would be better used to take care of the property, instead of turning the rights over to someone else.

Commissioners commented on various concerns including lack of future open space opportunities, money issues, and there being few undeveloped parcels left in the city.

Commissioner Roman commented that in the long term there will be considerable change surrounding Jim's Prairie. It cannot be sustained as it is today.

Ms. Gaynor responded that even if development occurs, Jim's Prairie will still be a natural area owned by the City of Maplewood. It might be lower ecological quality but it would still retain some value for habitat.

Commissioner Fischer asked if the commissioners were ready to make a motion on Jim's Prairie and the Priory. Commissioner Binko made a motion that the city should enter into a conservation easement for Jim's Prairie, seconded by Commissioner Fischer. Ayes - 0, all nays. Parks Commission recommends the city does not pursue a conservation easement for Jim's Prairie.

Commissioner Christianson made a motion that the city not subject Priory Preserve or Jim's Prairie property to a conservation easement, seconded by Commissioner Brannon. Commissioner Sonnek aye, Commissioner Peterson nay, Commissioner Schmidt nay, Commissioner Roman nay, Commissioner Christianson aye, Commissioner Binko nay, Commissioner Fischer aye, Commissioner Brannon aye. Tie vote, motion fails.

Commissioner Binko made a motion that the city should enter into a conservation easement for Priory Preserve, seconded by Commissioner Schmidt. Commissioner Brannon nay, Commissioner Binko aye, Commissioner Fischer nay, Commissioner Christianson nay, Commissioner Roman aye, Commissioner Schmidt aye, Commissioner Peterson aye, Commissioner Sonnek nay, tie vote, motion failed.

Commissioner Sonnek stated that she does not like to tie our future hands on this. She supports preserving this land but does not want to speak for the next generation.

Commissioner Fischer said they would not be able to come up with a recommendation for the Priory site.

VII. LION'S PARK

Staff member Steve Kummer gave a presentation on the preliminary engineering study for Lion's Park and concerns about drainage. This development dates back to the 1950s and does not have a storm sewer system. Today Lion's Park is the lowest point in a 24-acre drainage basin that is fully developed. Current equipment includes youth ball diamond, playground equipment, and a basketball court. This area is very wet, water spreads out across the park, concentrates in the ditch area and goes under Century Avenue. The surrounding neighborhood is developed, making it impossible to bypass drainage into another area. The soil tests indicate no potential for infiltration.

- Stormwater is an issue that should be handled in conjunction with park development, balancing park use and drainage requirements.
- Management of surrounding neighborhood drainage with Lion's Park should be incorporated into a future development plan for the park but we should also look at the neighborhood holistically when we design this park.
- Staff is looking for direction from the Parks Commission on the stormwater issues at the park.