

March 3, 2017

Deb Bartels, Project Manager  
Bde Maka Ska (Lake Calhoun) & Lake Harriet Master Plan  
Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board



Ms. Bartels,

We appreciate your distributing for comment the comprehensive and detailed Draft Master Plan for Lake Calhoun/Bde Maka Ska and Lake Harriet [Lakes' Master Plan]; this letter provides feedback from the Friends of Roberts Bird Sanctuary [FRBS], along with requested changes. Although the Sanctuary is not included in the project area for the two Lakes' Master Plan, its adjacency to the project area means that projects included in the Plan will affect the Sanctuary.

The Roberts Management Plan approved by MPRB Commissioners in 2015 establishes this vision for the Sanctuary: *"The Thomas Sadler Roberts Bird Sanctuary is a public bird sanctuary treasured by visitors as a place of beauty and quiet in the urban environment, supporting a diversity of resident and migrating birds in a natural and undeveloped setting while providing environmental education opportunities to a broad audience."* The Sanctuary is known and valued and as a rare oasis of nature for humans and other animals in the City. Part of the Chain of Lakes Important Bird Area, the land inside and around the Sanctuary (a "buffer zone" outside the fenced area), provides critical habitat and resting areas for many species of migratory birds. Hundreds of birds also gather on both lakes during spring and fall migrations, as hundreds of thousands of birds journey along the Mississippi Flyway.

With sufficient and sustained commitment and will to protect our environment, the Park Board can and should be a leader in protecting and enhancing the fragile ecology of these lakes, for current and future generations of humans and wildlife. Yet a clear and overarching vision for environmental stewardship (vs. asset management) is missing in the draft Plan, and the Natural Resources recommendations offer a piecemeal approach that reflects this lack of vision. References in the draft Plan to Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, highlight what he calls nature deficit disorder ("the decreased exposure of American children to nature"), yet seem to miss the point of Louv's book. Far from suggesting that outdoor recreation *per se* will address the nature deficit, Louv writes that children need to experience joy and wonder in nature, through outdoor discovery during nature walks, gardening, flora and fauna observation, backyard camping, wildlife identification, and time for unstructured play and interaction with the natural world.

Yet the draft Plan does not explore how the ecology of the lakes can be preserved and enhanced to provide a setting for these types of experiences. Instead the draft Plan concludes, *"To stay relevant and be equitable, MPRB (and Met Council) will need to accommodate new activities and related recreational infrastructure in all of its parks, including its regional parks, and prepare to provide a multitude of settings for new recreational opportunities throughout its system."* (page 196) This nebulous approach reflects an imbalance toward recreation at the expense of the natural environment. The goal is not for MPRB to "stay relevant" but to fulfill its mission to *"permanently preserve, protect, maintain, improve, and enhance its natural resources, parkland, and recreational opportunities for current and future generations"* in an equitable manner (MPRB's 2007-2020 Comprehensive Plan).

We ask that the “Environment theme” be modified to emphasize environmental protection, such as “Minimize the ecological impacts and consider the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of built amenities and improvements.” We question the “Recreation theme” as stated: “*Renew facilities that support existing recreational use. Add, modify or expand facilities that respond to trends that reflect the region’s changing demographics.*” This theme suggests that the lakes are to be used as playgrounds for activities that can be offered elsewhere, without a body of water nearby. Given increasing environmental challenges, and the fact that visitors expect these lakes to survive over time, we question whether it’s appropriate to expect the lakes to support even more development to respond to ever-changing trends. Further stressing the lakes’ ecology by investing in infrastructure to support activities whose popularity may wane relatively soon is unwarranted.

The demand for many of the activities mentioned in the draft Plan as rising in popularity—skateboarding, rock climbing, rugby, lacrosse, and disc golf—can be accommodated elsewhere in the Minneapolis Park system, without further damaging the lakes’ land, trees, and water. Indeed, the top five recreational activities in regional parks—walking/hiking, biking, swimming, picnicking, and relaxing—are timeless, which justifies and even requires making environmental protection a top priority in this Master Plan. Thus, Friends of Roberts asks that the Natural Resources recommendations (Section 3) include a new #1 recommendation that addresses the urgency in protecting “*the land, trees, and water [that] are the foundation of the park system*” (MPRB’s 2007-2020 Comprehensive Plan). For example, “Protect the ecological functioning of these lakes and their land, trees, and water, as the foundation of the entire park system.”

We also request that existing Natural Resources recommendations be revised to be robust and unambiguous in protecting and enhancing the natural environment. For example, rather than strive for *no net loss of trees*, FRBS requests that the Plan require that *more trees* be planted as a result of the proposed projects, knowing as we do that many trees are being lost to disease and severe weather events, that the urban canopy has been declining, and that trees provide countless benefits to humans and other animals. Similarly, rather than merely *consider* stormwater management, FRBS requests that the Plan *require* stormwater management in all projects, with no increase in runoff to the lakes that would further degrade water quality. For another example, the Park Board should consider amending the plan to add the goal of improving the habitat around Lake Calhoun for shorebirds. The planned increase in impervious surfaces around the lakes that is condoned in the draft Master Plan would be an example of development at the expense of the environment. The Plan should also consistently note that plantings will be of native species, and that the lakes are pesticide-free zones.

Friends of Roberts also requests that the Master Plan explicitly address the serious damage to the natural environment of soil compaction and de-icing, through additional Natural Resources recommendations that commit to implementation of specific solutions, both general and associated with specific projects in all focus areas. A discussion and recommendation of less-damaging alternatives to sodium chloride needs to be added to this section of the Master Plan.

The draft Master Plan surprisingly includes a recommendation to “improve the west entrance into Roberts Bird Sanctuary, making it ADA accessible.” This recommendation is confusing, because the Plan states, “*The Thomas Sadler Roberts Bird Sanctuary, on the northern shore of Lake Harriet and adjacent to Lakewood Cemetery, was excluded from the project because it has its own parallel master planning process and funding.*” The recommendation to develop the west entrance contradicts the Master Plan’s exclusion of Roberts from the project area. This recommendation is also inconsistent with the Roberts

Management Plan, which does not identify changes to the west entrance as a need (other than minor changes to resolve safety issues with better signage and an improved crosswalk). In no public meeting we attended—for the Roberts Management Plan, the Lakes Master Plan, or the Roberts Capital Improvements project—was there any support from the public for a second accessible entrance, including from constituents with special needs.

A letter to the Park Board in 2016 from several community groups (Friends of Roberts Bird Sanctuary, Lynnhurst Neighborhood Association, the Environment Committee of the Linden Hills Neighborhood Council, Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis, and Minneapolis Audubon Society) explained that master planning efforts for the Sanctuary focused on ensuring ADA compliance on the east side, through the visitors shelter near the Rose Garden parking lot. It stated, “Current plans are to use capital improvement funds to repair the visitor shelter foundation and replace the existing boardwalk with a new low-impact, low-maintenance ADA-compliant boardwalk that will be accessible through the visitors shelter. A new entrance on the west side is therefore unnecessary and would use scarce funds to duplicate access already available on the east side.”

Although we support improved access to the Sanctuary, this goal can be achieved in ways that are consistent with the Roberts Management Plan. It’s important to note that the Roberts Plan identifies other urgent needs for the Sanctuary, such as repairing the fence and replacing the boardwalk. Even if the Sanctuary were included in the Lakes’ Master Plan, priority projects identified in the Roberts Management Plan should take precedence over other potential projects for the Sanctuary. Long-standing safety and security issues should be addressed as indicated in the Roberts Plan. Please eliminate the contradiction in the Master Plan and the inconsistency with the approved Roberts Plan by removing the recommendation to develop the west entrance to the Roberts Bird Sanctuary.

Finally, we would also like to correct a statement in the draft Plan (page 159) that “The maintenance area is disliked by neighbors and Roberts Birds Sanctuary advocates...” While we cannot speak for all the neighbors, we can assure the Park Board that Friends of Roberts has not expressed dislike for the maintenance area, though we have complained about the use of pesticides in the area and requested that no pesticides be used in and near the Sanctuary. We recognize the need for facilities to maintain the nearby gardens. Our position (stated in a letter dated February 12, 2016) is that “The current maintenance area is located on land carved out of the Sanctuary, and any space gained by reducing the size of the maintenance area should be restored to the Sanctuary.” Hence, we appreciate and applaud the Plan’s provision that: “*Any land vacated as the result of reorganization of the maintenance facilities should be restored to habitat for Roberts Bird Sanctuary*”, and have stated so in public meetings. We look forward to the restoration of land on the west side of the current maintenance area and appreciate that the Park Board plans to remove decades of maintenance debris that currently pollutes the Sanctuary land and waters.

Thank you for your work on this project and for accepting these comments.

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