



Photo by Richard Hurd

To: MSA Professionals and City of Madison Parks
From: Friends of Lake Wingra
Date: December 3, 2020
Re: Friends of Lake Wingra Comments on Final Draft Vilas Park Master Plan

Dear City of Madison Parks and MSA Professionals:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the final draft of the Vilas Park Master plan. We are excited to see all of the positive changes that will transform park users' experience and we also have recommendations that we think will nurture community trust and understanding as the plan gets implemented. Our comments are organized by category of components we support, components we have concerns about, and general recommendations to strengthen this process moving forward.

Components of the Plan Friends of Lake Wingra Supports

Vilas Park Drive

Ending through traffic on Vilas Park Drive and prioritizing the pedestrian experience is one of the most positive contributions from the master plan. The plan addresses accessibility and vehicular access points still allow those with mobility issues to visit different parts of the park.

Open space & shoreline restoration

We support the opportunity to find a more productive use for poorly graded and frequently wet areas of the park. Continuing to restore riparian buffers along the shorelines and lagoon would help prohibit the movement of geese from land to water. Geese largely contribute to beach closures at Vilas due to *e. coli*. When you look at all of the pollutants responsible for Vilas Beach closures, *e. coli* comes in first.

Multi-use paths

Our strategic planning outreach in 2018 identified about 76% of people who visit Lake Wingra enjoy walking along the lake and about 37% exercise along the shoreline. We anticipate enhancing the multi-use paths will benefit park users' experience tremendously.

Concerns about Particular Components of the Plan

Lagoon Management

Friends of Lake Wingra understands that this is a master plan and so the lagoon did not undergo extensive technical analysis. The master plan acknowledges the pastime of ice skating at Vilas Park.



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Language supplementing the schematic acknowledges different management strategies will need to occur to continue providing ice skating at the lagoon.

With that said, we have serious concerns about how lagoons and wetlands might be managed or created without acknowledging tradeoffs or understanding how that impacts the rest of Lake Wingra and its ecosystem. One particular example, bogs don't naturally exist in this part of Wisconsin, and especially not in areas with urban runoff. However, the master plan proposes part of the lagoon transitioning into a bog. The area around Big Spring in the Arboretum was originally designed to replicate a bog, with debatable success. Even trying to create a fen type ecosystem in the lagoon would be challenging.

Because of these reasons, **we recommend that management of the lagoon be one of the first park features to receive funding for implementing, or further technical studies regarding proposed changes to the lagoon. When the lagoon influences other park features, like the location of the shelter, it would be unwise to invest in those other park features until we collectively have a better understanding of how the lagoon will be managed.**

We do appreciate the City acknowledging that any changes done to the lagoon need to be technically validated in the final public survey. Increasing the transparency of this messaging in the final product of the master plan will result in less confusion down the road.

Lighting

The master plan should include commitments to use dark sky best practices for any lighting required in Vilas Park. This would help safeguard terrestrial and aquatic biota from the effects of urbanization and also reduce the impact on the neighborhood. The Edgewood Stadium process serves as a reminder for how sensitive an issue this is for community members. Proactively addressing this topic will help show goodwill toward the community.

Additional Requests and Recommendations

1. Redesign the public engagement process when implementing major features of the Vilas Park Master Plan

Because of the interconnected tradeoffs among park features and because the master plan does not dive deep into technical analyses of all park features, such as lagoon management, **we strongly recommend redesigning the public engagement process for implementation of the master plan, especially for major features like the Vilas Park Drive redesign or lagoon management.**

Slow, effective, and transparent public engagement provides the most reliable way for equitable community buy in. Our participation in the resident resource group, and from conversations with various residents, highlighted several opportunities to enhance clear and effective public engagement processes. We want to avoid having the community feel like they are trying to board a ship after it's already disembarking. **We recommend the City commits to working with some of the stakeholders to formulate a satisfactory public engagement process before any project kicks off or RFP is released for key park features throughout the implementation of the master plan.** Doing so will also address concerns about having consistent and clear explanations

about the tradeoffs of different design features. The lagoon in particular is a topic that has made many wary about the validity of the master plan.

2. Continually assess future parking demands and trends

We acknowledge that existing City/County agreements may dictate surface parking quotas in the short term. **Friends of Lake Wingra would like to see the City of Madison continually and progressively consider ways to adapt and anticipate future transportation trends.** This includes brainstorming unique ways to satisfy parking during peak periods after the adoption of the master plan. Capital improvements for parking may not occur for several years, circumstances may change and invalidate parking quotas determined at the time of the master plan's creation. The Parks Department has even acknowledged how existing features in Vilas Park are not designed in a way we would have designed them today. This emphasizes how trends change.

The life and death of strip malls provide us with an example of how once vibrant attractions can become dilapidated and underutilized. No one wants to negatively impact the character of Lake Wingra, the surrounding neighborhoods, or Vilas Park. When the time comes to address parking and if credible sources suggest we don't need the originally sized parking lots in the master plan, then we should honor new data and trends. **The city can even start proactively identifying a parking plan that would address potential changes in parking demand over the years. We understand accessibility is a concern. Part of this plan could explore the use of all terrain wheelchairs from designated parking areas so visitors can still access the interior of the park.** We encourage the city to innovatively approach parking in a way that will keep enhancing the ambiance of Lake Wingra, a park secluded from the city.