

Nov 29, 2023 |

📅 Natural Resources & Environment Subcommittee

Attendees: Philip A., Matt B., Tim B., Chris B., Corky E., Janet F., Mel F., George H., Derek L., Kayla M., Julie N., Henry P., Keenan P., Zak S., and Bob V.

Notes

- Introductions
 - Brief introductions
 - Background of Weaver and Prairie Parks
 - Tim Bartlett
 - The acquisition of Weaver was ~ 20 years ago (Grant was in 2002)
 - Can the Urbana Park District find a site that can combine our athletics and natural areas? (UPD found Weaver and Prairie Park site for a mixed use purpose)
 - Other districts have higher quality athletic programs (Normal, Champaign, Decatur, Springfield) these sites have a variety of athletics and some have amenities that also serve a shared use purpose for natural areas
 - Schools have changed, we cannot gain access to school grounds for the public to use
 - Shared site (future transportation for bike corridors, KRT trail head, natural areas, and athletics)
 - Weaver and Prairie Parks are classified as a signature park; it is a destination that people come to
 - Wetland was a success for Scottswood Subdivision (there was flooding prior and this is why the wetland was created)
 - Concepts from the first master plan was a shared site with prairie, woodlands, and active recreation
 - Creating a way for people to visit Weaver and Prairie Parks (Health & Wellness Center and athletics) is the way to bring awareness to nature aspects that the parks have to offer

- Most park projects work in 5-10 year phases, Weaver and Prairie Parks operated differently due to the lack of resources and opportunities in the past. We now have a great opportunity and resources to continue what we started with our 2005 Master Plan for Weaver and Prairie Parks
 - Approximately \$1M of the \$11.2 million from ITEP will be purposed to build the trailhead
 - Our mission is not solely focused on conserving and preserving natural resources like a forest preserve district. We value our natural areas but we aim to round out our parks by providing a little bit of everything for all of Urbana
 - Leaving Weaver and Prairie Park alone and not doing anything is not something that is feasible for us; that is not the plan we are aiming for
 - Making a plan to get out of county property; we cannot apply grants to short term leased or rented property
 - Buying other land is off the table; we are lacking the resources and we have land that we bought for this which is Weaver and Prairie Parks
 - Weaver and Prairie Parks is surrounded by a high hope neighborhood and UPD capitalized by buying the land for future development for athletics and natural areas
 - The board wants to see UPD, steering committee and residents come together to make a plan for Weaver and Prairie, but not to leave it alone. The goal is a shared use site that provides for many interests and needs.
- **Park classification breakdown**
 - Signature park (Weaver/Prairie, Meadowbrook, Perkins Rd Park Site/Dog Park/Webber, Crystal Lake) - We consider these parks destination parks that combine multiple use areas and natural areas.
 - **Vision to grow east Urbana**
 - By making Weaver & Prairie more attractive with a Health & Wellness Center and a shared use site for recreation and passive recreation
- **Community Engagement**
 - Public engagement completed so far

- We have reached out to gain additional members for the School and Community engagement committee which was not well attended. We have added two neighbors and are seeking additional representation from the school district. We welcome the natural resources subcommittee assistance if they know of folks
 - Natural Resources Inventory and Assessment
 - Initial community survey focused on athletics to see what in the 2004 Master Plan was still valid today in terms of athletic needs so we could update the plan based upon current needs/interest; There was very little in the survey about natural resources but rather we worked with our natural areas advisory committee, Audubon, and focus group participants to identify which resources were in highest need for protection and buffering
 - We want to get a better idea for what folks feel our natural resources needs and gaps are throughout the district
 - Can we make up for the loss from Weaver's lost natural resources? Create a different area?
 - George – We need Weaver there because of the surrounding areas – schools, recreation center, etc...
 - Buffering will be needed around the wetland for the birds but based upon research and precedent sites, it should be successful for the birds to continue to utilize the wetland habitats
 - Grassland birds need more assessment - LeConte's and Nelson's Sparrows and Nelsons in particular will be a challenge to keep around – typically found in large forest preserves or along Great Lakes – very rare to see at small fragment habitats like Weaver and Prairie Parks
 - Pollinators - Get more information, cover crop low diversity prairie will have less of an impact than the more wildflower diverse pollinator prairie areas. Potential to plant more pollinator habitat to buffer wetland.
- **FAQs**
 - Answering Natural Resource FAQs staff have encountered
- **Next Meeting**
 - Discussing the agenda for next meeting
 - Date and time

Questions/Comments

- Julie N.** - Lacking diversity in our committee groups
 - How many schools use the cross country route at Weaver & Prairie Parks?
 - Corky E.** - All Urbana district schools
 - Asking the county to lease that brookens land?
- Mel F.** - From the beginning it sounds like the grant and process called for something like Meadowbrook. Is this true?
 - Tim B.** - Buying this park was meant for athletics but at the time there was less of a commitment to spend money there. So they planned for the future that this park will have high quality athletics while also being a shared site - Urbana's nac is to find larger parks
- Zak S.** - Purchasing the brookens property? Just the soccer field?
 - Tim B.** - They don't know what they're going to do as of now; we don't want to put ourselves in a situation where we're in a precarious and uncertain athletic field situation with the county; we don't have the resources to acquire land right now. Cannot make grant funded improvements to a leased or rented site. We need to own. We don't want to rent or lease from the county. No sites available right now
- George H.** - The Public can act as a bridge between Public Service agencies and servants - there might be a chance to get land around Lierman from the county, and explore acquiring other lands as most appropriate.
- Chris B.** - The grant that was 30 years ago used to acquire Weaver & Prairie Parks, what was it specifically for baseball and softball fields?
 - Tim B.** - Yes I believe so
- The quality of Weaver & Prairie is high because of the amount of space; the quality of the natural area will not be same after the Master Plan
- Has the demographic of sports changed? From 2004 to 2023?
 - Corky E.** - We reduced the amount of soccer and softball/baseball fields
- More people will use Weaver Park with a higher quality natural areas, meaning more space for natural areas and less space for athletics
- Larger natural area will aesthetically be more beneficial than baseball fields

- Keep the soccer fields, and bring in other things that bring in athletics (Not baseball/softball)
- David Hayes - More quality and value as a larger natural area than devoting it to baseball and softball fields
 - Derek L.** - The purpose of this committee group is to discuss natural resource protection; How do we best add active use while keeping critical natural resources safe? What best protects these critical natural resources throughout this process?
 - Tim B.** - It has always been a shared site but can we work with residents to come up with a plan that everyone agrees on
- Kayla M.** - The amount of natural areas that we have at Weaver and Prairie Parks separate us from other park districts
 - We're reducing the quality of Weaver and Prairie Parks
- Julie N.** - Request for grants involving Weaver & Prairie Parks
- Tim B.** - How can we use this to make everything better?
- Bob V.** - Reducing the athletic footprint
 - Give natural areas a little more space
 - Sacrifice the practices fields on the south so we can buffer the wetland better
 - East edge of soccer and baseball diamonds need a berm (5-6ft)
 - Reducing the parking, it is planned for the ultimate event, meadowbrook doesn't have that much parking and still hosts large events
 - Parking can be reduced by almost half
 - Parking area in the north should not connect to any parking area in the south
 - Baseball has very little participation and soccer has a lot more
 - Just one softball diamond and not two
 - Traffic in and out would be best in the south end of Prairie Park
 - North entrance is right in the middle of main so lets direct traffic south where there is a middle lane that people can turn (no stop signs on main st)
 - Limit paths through prairie

- These suggestions will do a lot to preserve the natural areas
- Mel F.** - Southwest corner for athletics (Farnsworth Option 2 Plan)
 - Soccer will have a bigger impact than baseball will for our athletics; so, we should try to focus more on soccer instead of baseball
 - Soccer 300-350 kids Mon - Wed, Tue - Thur, Sat
- Kayla M.** - Many invested and interested in soccer; yet to see a strong compelling reason to get these softball fields
 - We need a strong justification for having softball fields
- Philip A.** - Excited about the possibility of non-synthetic turf soccer fields
 - What kind of engagement do we have ecologically? For the same kids that do athletics
- George H.** - Can we explore sports fields in other places - better where already monocultured or turfgrass, easily having toxins from these, and from mowing, and cars, also in parking, as we see around S. Lierman, Bartel; where big lights adjacent would not so impact night flying insects, during an insect apocalypse, and our mass extinction, among others so intensively, nor neighborhoods; and where amplified, rowdy, aggressive sound would not terrorize other, more valuable species?
 - Education and Recreational facilities being nearby a protected natural area, like Weaver, can gain a great deal from the biodiversity supported, encouraged and enhanced here; while sports fields nearby but not cutting into these, can also cheer on ecological well being, as core to wellness, where undisturbed can support compatible recreation before and after a hard days work and playing hard nearby, enhancing human wellness, too, per studies.
 - We need not dismiss the benefit of sports fields, nearby - not taking from Weaver's natural areas. Instead we can celebrate and support these being better placed, cheering all on, while keeping basic crucial wellness for other long more belonging species, and supporting recreational benefits for our own species, in more appropriate placement.
 - Let's keep this area around S. Lierman as for sports fields, to our ability as a community, with respective public entities, and others as needed, nearby Weaver, while keeping Weaver as an intact natural area, while exploring more compatible education, and recreation maintained - like

running, walking, cross country skiing on edge trails, arts - visual, theatric, poetry, etc.

- Derek L.** - We need people for our school and community engagement committee - More diverse representation in our committees
- George H.** - Reach out to the indigenous groups in Urbana
- Kayla M.** - Feeling like a lost cause, hard for people to participate because there is no room to do anything; is it a set plan that we cannot reverse?
- Tim B.** - We are open, we need to provide multiple benefits for everyone and not cater to just one group
- George H.** - We are going to lose the experience if we cut out too much of the natural area
- Kayla M.** - Don't end up like Sunset Park where natural area is an afterthought
- Derek L.** - Forest preserve can excel in large habitat areas but can't as easily connect with people like we do; we're in people's backyard; People are our focus, we want to engage them in our natural areas by introducing them through environmental education and/or a nature walk, or any other way that might draw their attention to nature
- Derek L.** - Gave other park examples of athletics and natural areas combined – this should be our goal; how can we combine these elements so that we have a working park and system?