

# Report of the 2017 Meetings and Recommendations of the Wilderness Park Strategic Planning and Community Advisory Committee

## Introduction

Wilderness Park lies along the floodplain of Salt Creek from about Van Dorn Street south to Saltillo Road. It was created through an agreement between the City of Lincoln, Lancaster County and what was at the time called the Salt Valley Watershed District and is now the Lower Platte South Natural Resource District. The park land lies on the west side of the City of Lincoln and is primarily outside of the City limits. The property is owned by Lancaster County but is maintained and managed by the City of Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department through an interlocal agreement.

Over the years there have been several planning efforts both to plan, program and set up appropriate maintenance for Wilderness Park. Most recently, flood damage in 2015 again raised concerns regarding how trails and bridges are maintained. Wilderness Park is unique among the City's park resources in that it is primarily maintained in a "wild" state with minimal structural improvement. Budget and staffing reductions over the years have made it more challenging to maintain the park. In years when moisture is high, vegetation can grow quickly and reduce the ability to get machinery and maintenance equipment into the park, adding another layer of difficulty.

## The Committee

In the 1990s a goal was set to develop a long term plan for Wilderness Park. Increased concern for the ecology of the park, decreased budgets for maintenance and proposed development near the park all raised the public awareness and concern for the future of Wilderness Park. This resulted in several different studies that were brought together in 1999 with the Wilderness Park Subarea Plan. Professor Kip Hulvershorn of the University of Nebraska integrated multiple studies and worked with stakeholder groups to develop the subarea plan and maintenance recommendations which were adopted in 2000.

One of the recommendations of the subarea plan was the establishment of an advisory group to give input on maintenance and ecological activities in the park. A committee including public and private organizations such as the Natural Resources District, Friends of Wilderness Park, the Great Plains Trails Network, the Sierra Club, and others met annually and primarily discussed the ecology of the park and projects to help improve the natural community and manage invasive vegetation. In the past 5 to 10 years, this group has met infrequently and not at all since 2013.

With the flooding in 2015, and the resulting impacts to the park, there was renewed interest in engaging a similar group. Parks reached out to 14 different stakeholder organizations and requested a total of 16 representatives. 15 representatives accepted the invitation. See Attachment A for letter and Journal Star article.

Parks and Rec Advisory Board **Susan Deitchler**  
Community Forestry Advisory Board **Andy Campbell**  
Pedestrian Bicycle Advisory Committee **Rick Dockhorn**  
County Ecological Advisory Committee, **Judi Cook**

Friends of Wilderness Park, **Dan King, Bob Henrickson**  
Lower Platte South NRD, **Dan Schulz**  
Wachiska Audubon **Tim Knott**  
Sierra Club, **Kendall Weyers**  
Mayor's Environmental Task Force – **Dan Schlitt**  
Trails Have Our Respect – **Matt Gersib**  
Great Plains Trails Network **Chris Heinrich**  
Run for the Bridges **Rosina Paolini**  
Lincoln Track Club **Joeth Zucco**  
Nebraska Horse Trails Committee **Tanya Lynch**

Prior to the meetings, a community survey with questions pulled from a previous Wilderness Park survey (1999) was promoted via social media and media release (<http://lincoln.ne.gov/city/mayor/media/2017/020317b.htm>). There were 706 participants in the survey and a report of the survey is attached as Appendix B. The Power Point presentation from the February 22 meeting has a summary of those responses, comparing them to the responses from the 395 participants in the 1999 survey. This survey was used to help guide the discussion of the committee members.

The committee met four times over the period of 3 months. In order to be mindful of everyone's time, the first and last meetings included all participants, but the other two meetings were split into two topic areas: Trails and Facilities or Ecosystems. Each participant was separated into these topic areas according to the group they represented, however, participants that chose to attend both topic meetings were allowed to do so. Agendas and meeting notes, as well as any meeting materials, are attached as Appendix C.

## Results

The committee was informed of several projects in the Wilderness Park vicinity and the potential impacts to the park. Opportunities for park improvements and mitigation projects associated with these projects were discussed. The committee was given the opportunity to bring forward any projects or policies that they felt would improve the park as well. The Trails & Facilities sub-committee discussed bridge repair and replacement, parking lot improvements, signage and surface issues. The concept of multi-use trails and unidirectional bike trails was also discussed. The Ecosystems subcommittee discussed control of invasive species, habitat development, and prioritization strategies for staff and volunteer efforts.

## Overall Goals

Overall goals were developed in the early 2000s and were primarily focused on habitat development. The group spent some time reviewing, amending and adding to these goals. The newly amended goals are attached as Appendix D.

## Further Discussion Needed

Several items were identified for further staff and/or community discussion. Some of these will require significant study and community input. Among these are: Wider community discussion of the concept of shared use trails within the park; the desire for single track cycling facilities in the system; a

comprehensive sign package for Wilderness Park; encroaching vegetation on trails making mowing difficult to impossible; and the potential vacation of a portion of W. Calvert and 1<sup>st</sup> Streets. The input from the committee on these topics is included in the meeting notes, primarily for April 19. The Parks Department will continue to work on each of these topics over the next several months.

### *Evaluation Matrix*

Parks staff developed a matrix of the various work items discussed during the committee meetings. This matrix separates the topic areas into rows labeled Day Camp, Parking Lots, Signage, Bridges, Trails, and Ecosystem. For each of those topics, columns were identified that reflect the appropriate action to be taken. These actions are separated as Policy and Procedure, LPR Staff, 10-Year Infrastructure Plan, Volunteer Opportunity, and Donation Opportunity. The committee was asked to give feedback on the matrix and to assign relative priorities of A, B, and C to each. The matrix with aggregate responses is included as part of Appendix C under the April 19 materials. It is summarized below:

### *Policies and Procedures*

1. A policy of promoting “Pack-in/Pack-out” behavior should be instituted in Wilderness Park. Trash collection in parking lots could be reduced, and possibly food waste that attracts wildlife as well, with this policy. This should be considered in development of signage and in other promotional efforts. This received an “A” ranking from the committee.
2. An ID system for bridges in Wilderness Park should be developed to aid in communication and navigation. Currently nick-names and historic descriptions are used to describe crossings and are not consistent. This received an “A” ranking from the committee.
3. An “Adopt-A-Trail” program for Wilderness Park should be instituted to help not only with trash collection but with routine vegetation management. This received an “A-” ranking from the committee.
4. An ID system for trails in Wilderness Park should be developed to aid in communication and navigation. This may be increasingly important if trails go to multi-use as they will no longer be the “bike trail” or the “horse trail”. This received an “A+” ranking from the committee.
5. Focus efforts for control of invasive species on areas where invasives are in an early stage of colonization. This is often the time when control can be most effective and woody plants are easiest to remove. This received an “A+” ranking from the committee.
6. Not all non-native species should be targeted for removal. Many of these are historic remnants of farm houses and gardens and are not aggressively invasive, nor do they pose a threat to native species. The Epworth and Day Camp areas have particularly historic significance. This received a “B” ranking from the committee.
7. Seek out grant funds for ecological restoration work. In the past, grant funds have been used for prairie seeding, wetland restoration, and oak-hickory seedling plantings. This received an “A-” ranking from the committee.

### *LPR Staff*

1. Replace Bollards in parking lots. Some bollards have begun to rot or have been damaged or destroyed by vehicles. This allows vehicles to gain access to restricted areas. This received a ranking of “A-” from the committee.

2. Consider increasing frequency of trash removal. This is primarily to reduce the attraction of wildlife. This received a ranking of “B” from the committee.
3. Continue to monitor parking lot surfacing needs. This received a “B” ranking from the committee.
4. Continue to monitor all bridges, particularly the suspension bridge south of Pioneers and the wooden bridge over the Horizon tributary. All bridges are on a five year inspection rotation with any bridges that have had condition concerns on the last inspection being inspected more frequently. Inspections are performed by contracted with a qualified engineering firm. This received a “B+” ranking from the committee.
5. Extend the culvert under the Warlick overpass. This provides critical access for Parks maintenance equipment. A permit has been obtained from NDOR for work in the ROW and work will be performed this season. This received a ranking of “A” from the committee.
6. Monitor low water crossing near 14<sup>th</sup> Street parking lot and reroute trail as needed for 14<sup>th</sup> and Rokeby trail closure. The low water crossing is showing wear and will need improvement in the near future. The trail in the area was encroaching on State ROW and a reroute is necessary to rectify. This received a ranking of “A” from the committee.
7. Explore relocation of the wooden bridge south of Rokeby near the RR tracks. This bridge provides access to about ½ mile trail loop at the south end of the horse trail and a portion of the bridge and the north approaching trail are encroaching on RR property. Moving the bridge would likely cost about \$60,000 in order to maintain access to this trail loop. The bridge is currently closed due to its condition. This received a ranking of “B” from the committee.
8. Mow trail corridors 4 times per year. This is the current mowing cycle for the park. This received an “A+” ranking from the committee.
9. Evaluate possible improvements to fitness loop. The fitness loop is located in the northern “Day Camp” area of the park and is primarily a series of wooden structures which are showing extreme wear. These structures are used by day camp attendees and others. This received a ranking of “B” from the committee.
10. Monitor Sandstone Prairie. This is a unique area that is in need of maintenance and protection. The area is not accessed by the trail system and is not appropriate for high traffic. This received a ranking of “B+” from the committee.
11. Identify and map high value habitat areas and prioritize the most threatened for management. This received an “A” ranking from the committee.
12. Continue reduction of materials in the “boneyard” near the Greenways shop. This is a site LPR staff have been using for outdoor storage of boulders, concrete structures, old playground equipment, etc... Materials are susceptible to floating away during floods and many pieces have outlived their useful life. This received a “B” ranking from the committee.

#### *10-Year Infrastructure Plan*

1. Replace Octagon Building with new permanent facility. The octagon building was constructed as a temporary facility for the Day Camp some 30 years ago. It is in an area of the park that has no visibility and is vulnerable to vandalism and break ins. The bathrooms are not adequate and there is no storm shelter. Staff would like to have this

replaced with a larger, multi-function building in a location that would allow parking and be more visible. A feasibility study and preliminary design would likely be the first step. This received an "A-" ranking from the committee.

2. Varmint-proof trash cans in parking lots. Discourage wildlife from entering the parking areas and increase health and safety. This received a ranking of "B" from the committee.
3. Increase the size of the 14<sup>th</sup> Street parking lot and add equestrian features. The 14<sup>th</sup> Street parking lot has adjacent open space that could be used to expand an allow vehicles with horse trailers to maneuver. This parking lot is in an area of the City that is likely to remain rural and may also be easier for rural residents to access than some other lots. This makes it ideal for an equestrian parking area. Features such as mounting blocks could be added to make it more attractive to horseback users. This received a ranking of "B" from the committee.
4. Bike service racks at 1<sup>st</sup> Street lot. Similar to the 14<sup>th</sup> Street parking lot, the 1<sup>st</sup> Street lots could be improved to make it more attractive to cyclists by adding some features such as bike service racks. This received a rank of "B" from the committee.
5. Information kiosks in parking lots. Signage in the park needs to be refined with a comprehensive package, as described above. Informational kiosks could be included in that package and located in parking lots and at other major access points into the park. These kiosks could have information about trail etiquette, pack-in/pack-out, navigation, and other important and interesting topics. This would allow signage within the park to be minimal and to not detract from the surroundings. This received a ranking of "A" from the committee.
6. Improvements to bike and horse crossing of Cardwell Branch. This low water crossing has very steep approaches and a bottom that is not stable enough for safe horse use. Grading back the approaches and creating a flat base for solid footing is desirable. Concrete panels that may be appropriate to use on the base have been offered for donation by the Nebraska Horse Trails Committee. This received an "A-" ranking by the committee.
7. Repair wooden horse and bike bridge at about Yankee Hill Road. This bridge has experienced some movement with recent flooding as well as supporting beams that are beginning to decay. A preliminary engineering study has been performed and a repair plan developed at a cost of approximately \$60,000. This is a critical bridge for maintaining use and maintenance access within the park. This received a "B+" ranking from the committee.
8. Replacement of the Bike/Ped bridge at about Saltillo Road. The bridge that was formerly at this location collapsed and was removed about 8 years ago. Matching funds for an RTP grant, as well as settlement funds, are committed to this project and a grant application will be submitted in September of 2017. This project was not ranked by all committee members since it has already been committed to by the Department.
9. Rerouting of trail to Jamaica North at about Rokeby Road. The trail at this point passes between the Jamaica North and a bend of Salt Creek. The creek has moved in recent years and narrowed the passage to the point where the trail needs to be moved up onto Jamaica in order to get past that bend. This will require some grading and culverts in order to cross over drainage channels. In addition, the bank may need to be stabilized

in order to prevent further erosion from threatening the Jamaica North Trail. These project received rankings of “A-“ and “B+” respectively from the committee.

#### *Volunteer Opportunities*

1. Paint Bollards in parking lots. This will help to protect the bollards and to make them more visible to drivers. This received a ranking of “A-“ from the committee.
2. Minor repair and painting of bridges north of Calvert. There are several small bridges in the Day Camp and Fitness Loop areas of the park north of Calvert Street. These bridges are wooden and require regular maintenance and painting which could be volunteer projects. This received a ranking of “B+” from the committee.
3. Stabilize trail surface on bike trail bog south of Cardwell Branch. The bike trail south of Cardwell Branch runs through a low area and is very flat and does not drain well. This section of trail could be improved using geotextile and ballast rock to create a more stable base. This received an “A-“ ranking from the committee.
4. Trail vegetation management in priority areas to maintain ability to mow. Removal of invasive shrubs and trees from trail edges to create a corridor of sufficient width and height for equipment to pass through. See “Adopt-A-Trail” under Policies and Procedures above. This received a ranking of “A-“ from the committee.
5. Fitness Loop repairs and ongoing maintenance. After evaluation of possible improvements and repairs, volunteer labor could be used to do much of the Fitness Loop repair and maintenance. This received a rank of “B+” from the committee.
6. Focus on Cedar removal. Eastern Red Cedar, although a native species, is highly invasive and creates a monoculture with little habitat value. It is, however, easy for volunteers with little experience to identify. It does not come back when cut down below the lowest branch, so no pesticide is needed for its eradication. When small, it can be removed with a spade or even a hoe. This makes it a species that is ideal for volunteers to target. This received an “A-“ ranking from the committee.
7. Remove invasive exotic species. There are a number of invasive species that could be controlled by volunteers with a little training and possibly assistance from staff. Some of these species can only be controlled by mechanical means and volunteer labor would be very valuable. This received a rank of “A” from the committee.
8. Other volunteer considerations: Limit events to 2-3 hours in order to make the volunteer experience more pleasant. It is important to consider the limitations of volunteers when planning events. Transportation to work site could be challenging.

#### *Donation Opportunities*

1. Fundraising Campaign for Octagon Building replacement. Working with the Friends of Wilderness Park on a capital campaign for this major fundraising effort. This received an “A” ranking from the committee.
2. Varmint-proof trash cans. This received a rank of “A” from the committee.
3. Bike Servicing Racks. This received a rank of “B-“ from the committee.
4. Kiosks or wayfinding signage. This received a rank of “A” from the committee.
5. Continued work with Run for the Bridges and the Great Plains Trails Network to raise matching funds for bridge projects within the park. This received a rank of “A-“ from the committee.

## Next Steps

The recommendations of the committee will be used to set policy for the department, develop work plans for staff, items for inclusion in the 10-Year Infrastructure Plan, and volunteer events over the next year. Annual meetings of this group or similar groups will continue to inform the department on care of the park.

The items for further discussion identified in this process will be addressed over the next year. Some of these items will require staff discussions and work with other departments. Others will require input from the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, Pedestrian Bicycle Advisory Board and other appointed boards. Still other items will require further input from the public in the form of surveys and outreach to organizations.