



Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission

MEMORANDUM

To: Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission
From: Robert L. Tetens, Director
Date: May 8, 2012
Re: Proposed Amendment: Natural Areas Preservation Program – Ordinance No. 128

Background

The Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program (NAPP) was established by the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners with the passage of Ordinance No. 128 in August 2000. Funding for NAPP comes from a 10 year, dedicated millage approved by Washtenaw County voters in November 2000, and most recently renewed in November 2010. The Board of Commissioners charged the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission with implementation of the Program and management of the protected lands.

The stated purpose of the Natural Areas Preservation Program is to preserve and protect unique natural areas within Washtenaw County. Ordinance No. 128 notes that "Washtenaw County is a desirable place to live, work and visit in large part because of the existence of natural areas within the County." The Ordinance further notes "...the purchase of natural areas can be used to protect fragile lands and environmentally threatened lands."

Since its inception, the Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program has protected over 2300 acres of land. As a result, 22 new nature preserves have been established and made available to the public for their use and enjoyment. The Program has established strong working relationships with many of the communities within Washtenaw County and with other land preservation organizations such as the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy and Legacy Land Conservancy. NAPP was also recognized by the National Association of County Park and Recreation Officials in 2006 for "Outstanding Accomplishment in the Field of Parks and Recreation."

Discussion

As noted above, 22 new nature preserves which encompass over 2300 acres of land, have been established through the Natural Areas Preservation Program. The protected property contains many unique areas, including critical habitat for birds, animals and plants. Also included within the protected properties are active agricultural fields that comprised a portion of the larger parcel that was nominated for consideration by the Natural Areas Preservation Program. The establishment of these new nature preserves has created a corresponding growth in responsibility for the care and management – stewardship – of the properties. Proper care for the valuable resources contained within the preserves requires the allocation of significant resources. Development of an annual stewardship plan is one of the first tasks undertaken after establishment of a new preserve. Development and implementation of the stewardship plans are primarily performed by WCPARC staff. Activities comprising a typical stewardship plan include maintenance of trails/boardwalks; monitoring of plant and animal species; habitat restoration, including planting of native species; and control of invasive species through such tools as prescribed burns, manual removal, etc.

Ordinance No. 128, which governs NAPP, states that no more than 7% of the millage funds collected can be used "...to administer a land preservation program or maintain land purchased under this Ordinance." (SECTION 8, Ordinance No. 128) Currently, 7% of the NAPP millage generates approximately \$168,000 each year to fund stewardship efforts on the NAPP preserves. As the number of preserves established by NAPP grows however, this funding level is becoming insufficient to meet the requirements of prudent stewardship. Without additional funds for this activity, the resources which were deemed worthy of protection may be substantially diminished or lost.

At present, stewardship activities are performed by two permanent staff – a naturalist and park maintenance worker – assisted by two seasonal staff. The cost of the staff, along with equipment, supplies, travel, etc. is approximately \$160,000 – essentially the amount generated by 7% of the dedicated NAPP millage. However as noted above, the responsibilities associated with the current preserves have grown beyond the capacity of this staffing level. As new preserves are established, current staffing levels will prove even more inadequate. Based upon estimates prepared by staff, a responsible staffing level for stewardship of the preserves would currently require approximately \$240,000 per year in funding.

In addition to the immediate concern regarding funding for stewardship activities, is the risk the existing millage may not be renewed. If the NAPP millage was not renewed in 2020 there would be no source of funding for care and management of the preserves established through the Natural Areas Preservation Program. While public support of NAPP has been strong, a prudent and responsible approach to management requires identification of a sustainable stewardship program for all lands acquired through the NAPP millage. Without the assurance of a source of funding, the long term sustainability of NAPP, and the nature preserves it has established, is uncertain.

In reviewing possible solutions to this concern, staff has focused on the establishment of a dedicated reserve that could support a NAPP Stewardship Program. Once established at the necessary level, annual income could be generated similar to that which would be realized from an endowment fund. The principal of the fund would not be spent but would be used solely as the income through earnings generated by interest and dividends. Establishing a dedicated reserve could be accomplished by changing the allocation of 7% of the millage for stewardship to 25%. Allocating 25% of the NAPP millage to stewardship would, at present, generate approximately \$600,000 per year. After using \$240,000 of those funds for the ongoing activities, \$360,000 would remain to be invested in the dedicated reserve for long-term land stewardship. It is anticipated the dedicated reserve would grow to at least \$6,000,000 by the end of the current millage authorization. A dedicated reserve in the amount of \$6,000,000 would generate \$240,000 per year based upon an annual draw of 4%, a level which is considered sustainable.

Recommendation

It is my recommendation the Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission support amendment of Ordinance No. 128, allowing up to 25% of annual millage revenues to be dedicated to stewardship, so as to ensure the sustainability of the stewardship of the nature preserves established through the Washtenaw County Natural Areas Preservation Program.



ACREAGE CURRENTLY MANAGED

41% of our 4476 acres have been identified as Core Conservation Areas. This acreage includes pre-agricultural remnants (land which has never been tilled), and land that connects and buffers pre-agricultural remnants. Pre-agricultural remnants are hotspots of biodiversity and are the easiest lands to restore. We are currently managing 1/2 of the identified Core Conservation Area acreage (928 acres). **Core Conservation Areas are the lands where we can have the most impact.**



MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Successful ecological management brings habitats back into balance so native biodiversity can thrive. It involves removing invasive species over a period of time and reintroducing natural processes such as prescribed fire. Fire is an important management technique for 676 acres within the Core Conservation Area, including prairies, oak ecosystems, grasslands and fire-benefitted wetlands.



OPPORTUNITIES

Focusing consistent management effort on Core Conservation Area has the power to sustain and increase biodiversity. Well-managed natural areas are full of vibrant life and are appealing to a wide variety of people. They can add much to the quality of life for County residents and can strengthen the local economy through eco-tourism. Through identification of grants and partnerships for ecological management **the acreage of Core Conservation Area could feasibly be doubled.**

ALL HABITATS	Aeres	Total acres	% of system
Parks (managed)	372	1952	19%
NAPP (managed)	556	2524	22%
Parks+NAPP (managed*)	928	4476	21%
Parks+NAPP (identified**)	1868	4476	42%

FIRE MANAGED	Aeres	Total acres	% of system
Parks (managed)	340	1952	17%
NAPP (managed)	336	2524	13%
Parks+NAPP (managed*)	676	4476	15%
Parks+NAPP (identified**)	1392	4476	31%

*Managed - Core Conservation Areas currently under some level of ecological management.

**Identified - CCAs under ecological management plus CCAs identified, but not yet under management.