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City of Ashland, Wisconsin ~ Parks and Recreation Department
400 4th Ave West Ashland ~ WI 54806 ~ www.coawi.org

**JOINT MEETING OF THE CITY OF ASHLAND'S
PARKS & RECREATION and SUSTAINABILITY COMMITTEES
THURSDAY NOVEMBER 21 6:00-7:00pm
CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS or VIRTUALLY
Microsoft Teams**

Present: (Parks and Recreation Committee) - Mike Amman, David Ullman, Nancy Szyndor, Lauren Martinson, Jen Weiler, Kevin Seefeldt, Axel Peterman (Community Garden Representative)
(Sustainability Committee) – Charlie Ortman, Amy Amman, Meghan Salmon-Tumas, Beth Gehred

Absent: (Parks and Recreation Committee) – Philomena Kebec
(Sustainability Committee) – Kelly Westlund

Others Present: Sara Hudson-*Parks and Recreation Director*, Steven Wiley-*Planning and Development Director*, Dan Homola-*Facilities Foreman*, Emily Soderberg-*Project Manager* – *MSA Professional Services* (attended virtually), JoAnn Erickson

I. Call to Order:

Parks and Recreation Committee Chair Mike Amman called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm.

- a. Roll Call: Quorums were declared present for the Parks and Recreation and Sustainability Committees.
- b. Agenda Modification: Chair Amman asked if anyone had any changes to the agenda. None were proposed.

II. Public Comment Period: There were no public comments.

IV. Business Items:

Discussion and Possible Action on the City of Ashland's Parks Master Plan

Hudson had Emily Soderberg from MSA Professional Services present the draft Parks Master Plan. Soderberg presented on the plan purpose, planning process, and the intent of creating a sustainable framework for managing Ashland's Parks and Recreation assets. Soderberg explained the kick-off and public engagement process behind the plan. *David Ullman arrived at 6:03 pm.* Soderberg explained that Chapter 2 of the plan was the data analysis and needs of the project. She and her team had looked at national data also to compare data points and see where our community is relative to others across country on Parks and Recreation amenities. The analysis included an assessment of parkland acreage per 1,000 residents. *Axel Peterman arrived at 6:04 pm.* Based on Ashland's 2024 WI Department of Administration population counts the analysis comes out to 32 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents here. That rate is much higher than the majority of jurisdictions similarly sized. Soderberg explained the standards from the National Parks and Recreation Association (NPRA) for minimum thresholds we should be going for. She presented a table to show the difference between Ashland's figures and what the standard from the NPRA is. Soderberg wanted to incorporate figures from the City's 2025 budget that will be released. Additional tables presented show where Ashland's staffing and budget compare to other jurisdictions. Ashland has 5.83 FTEs per 1,000 residents which is below similarly sized communities. Ashland relative to other communities nationally has less staff and generally fewer financial resources to maintain a larger park system relative to its population size.

Chapter 3 is the park by park inventory. Soderberg toured all parks with city staff earlier in the year. She showed pictures from her site visit. Chapter 4 of the plan summarizes community feedback. Soderberg explained results from the survey. The planning team received over 400 responses from the survey. Chapter 5 lays out goals and policies along with general maintenance recommendations. The maintenance guideline appears in the appendix of the plan draft. Chapter 6 dives into implementation. Some implementation strategies include a turf to prairie conversion strategy and Parkland decommissioning strategy where deemed appropriate. The City has an overabundance of park facilities relative to population size. The planning team analyzed whether any properties are underutilized and could be candidates. Soderberg showed the three facilities. The next steps are to finalize the plan document, present it to COW/Council, incorporate information to satisfy Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORP) requirements, and send the final plan back to the Parks and Recreation Committee and Council for adoption. Soderberg explained the requirements of the Parks Master Plan vs. the CORP. Soderberg finished her presentation and welcomed questions and concerns.

Sztyndor asked if we know what the financial savings would be to decommission the three parks? Hudson answered that we can find out based on mowing time.

Martinson asked about some of the ongoing costs for the ballfields. She is curious how decommissioning one ballfield plays into the costs but also the use that field is getting throughout the summer. Hudson stated that when talking about the CIP budget and maintenance it would potentially save us \$100k. Northland has two fields available for public use but organizations do have to pay to use them. We currently have 11 fields so a lot for community our size.

Gehred stated that she has concerns about the plan. She recommends letting the problem be the solution. The public engagement was weak. A focus group with like-minded people isn't a focus group. What about children or teenagers? What about environmental service organizations? We have a different standard about parkland and open space pulling their weight economically. She does not think the solution is to take away parks that are well loved. Make parks more financially sustainable by putting an option in front of people. She is not impressed with some of the plan recommendations. She asked if Soderberg spent a day at the parks and asked the people that use them about them. She is not sure about the methodology used for the survey. We don't say that we should funnel money back into parks from tourism. Why don't we decommission some roads which cost us money here? The plan is not reflecting the will of the people but rather the will of the budget. She loves native plantings but there is not enough data to prove it will work. Hudson explained that she had gone to the 7th grade class and did some youth engagement during the process. She did the same activity we did for the public meeting. She had asked about the students' favorite things and least favorite things with the Parks and Recreation facilities. Hudson explained that for us to recoup costs on ball fields our little leagues wouldn't be able to afford the necessary fees. She stated that 20 years ago we probably had 20 public works and 20 parks people. Now we are probably at 12. Gehred stated that she was not seeing enough creativity and depth in the plan recommendations.

Seefeldt liked the report. It covers areas he wouldn't consider. He explained that he had minimal turnout for painting the fence at the west end park when they did a workday for this. Of the people that showed up, none use that park. This type of situation is not sustainable so he is not opposed to the plan recommendations.

Ortman is grateful we have created a plan. He was a native here. If there are no compelling reasons to keep a park he would advocate for a public hearing to discuss decommissioning. He sees the park by Tomlinson's getting used so is surprised to see that in there. He is not surprised on the West End one. He appreciates statistics but doesn't like using them to cut or expand the system. He likes that there is a plan here.

Chair Amman mentioned the City having additional acres of parkland. He asked Soderberg in terms of engagement if she thinks she will be able to do enough with the limited engagement that she could get. Soderberg answered that she supports additional engagement if we want that. She tried to identify the properties truly the least used. Soderberg will include all public comments in the appendix for the revised draft. Chair Amman stated that looking at Prentice and Bay City Creek they are half the acres of our overall total. Amman explained that 90 acres are mostly forested so be careful when throwing comparables. Soderberg stated that she could look just at developed parkland and could adjust the analysis. Hudson was going to have Soderberg do this as part of the CORP update.

Ullman provided a technical comment. The arts trail is treated as acres in the math but is linear. He explained that the maintenance on that trail is probably different than that on parkland. It shouldn't necessarily be added. He is surprised to see projections of population decline moving forward. What strategies are we using to address population decline? He likes this plan but wants to see something visionary. We have a mission statement but can we have a vision statement for our parks also? We can attract people based on our lands and recreational opportunities we have. He likes the plan goals and believes they are realistic. He wants to see a really visionary goal. What are we missing; what is going to attract people to Ashland? He mentioned the Bay City Creek mountain bike trail. It is kind of buried in the plan in undeveloped lands. There is a huge potential draw with it. Ullman mentioned developing recreation along Bay City Creek corridor. To what extent do we want this plan to guide us in the next 5-10 years versus do we want this plan to be visionary? Hudson mentioned the community's population decline. She explained that we can incorporate this stuff into the CORP which is more visionary. Soderberg stated that she likes this a lot. There are projects going on and a lot of exciting investments. There are visionary investments going on in the City. Soderberg tried to make sure mileage for arts trail is not included in the tables. She stated that she can reformat the table to make it more distinct that the trail mileage is not included.

Ullman explained that there is true growth and the perception of growth. Using parks is a tool for attracting people to the community. There is a perception of growth when Ullman goes to Duluth or Ironwood though both are losing population. This is the case when he sees people using the parks in both places.

Gehred asked if there is there a way to look at how the budget is made out to capture impact of parks. Before we go to decommissioning do the analysis. How much do nearby property values increase? We have a resource problem. She would like to see a Friends of the Parks group started. Why do parks struggle to find funding but when a new dump truck is needed it gets funded? We need to equalize feelings of valuation of infrastructure.

Peterman stated that he did not have the time to read the report but had the impression that there is equivalency between the park to prairie and decommissioning strategies. He strongly advises against decommissioning as a general policy. We can't go back once we do it. He proposed doing parks to prairie rather than decommissioning right off the bat.

Ortman stated that he is waiting for the climate migration to occur. The City is already doing some groundwork to try and encourage housing by changing the regulations. He loves the plan but it is tailored to how do we do more with less. He would like to see the plan show what the return on investment looks like. We need to look at the one-year debt levy increase to help fund some items. Staff would propose things and Council would decide. Ortman doesn't think we use this tool enough. It is not a permanent tax increase. Hudson replied that she thinks this is our plan for 2026.

Amy Amman asked for clarification that the proposed plan is to not go directly to decommissioning. Soderberg confirmed this. The parks would still be parks but be a different form of parks. Amman asked if the financial impact of pollinator habitat restoration was factored in. Hudson answered that we are trying to make it fiscally responsible to get projects done. We are putting fewer guys on mowers and maintenance guys are doing other projects that they wouldn't otherwise do. It is easier to find volunteers to weed versus mow.

Amman asked if we are we being realistic. We have a serious problem with buckthorn. She likes the idea of doing prescribed fire in some areas. She asked who does this. Hudson stated that the city has a GLRI grant to remove buckthorn. Some projects in the queue don't show up in the plan.

Martinson asked if there are opportunities for seasonal employment for mowing operations. Homola stated that we do have summer hiring. We pretty much take everyone that applies. We dropped the age requirement from 18 to 16. Hudson added that we have become really flexible with seasonal employees. Homala explained that the parks are getting deteriorated. We have so many but don't have the funds to spruce them up.

Tumas stated that she has been thinking about playgrounds a lot. It is expensive to maintain and replace them.

The report has statistics on playgrounds. Many kids want to go to a playground that has other kids there. Tumas explained that it is not necessarily about having more playgrounds but about having ones that are well sited and used. Can we take out some equipment or playgrounds that are expensive to maintain? Homola asked if the school playgrounds are mentioned in the plan. Soderberg answered that usually we focus on the City-owned and maintained facilities but referenced the school playgrounds in the plan.

Chair Amman stated that based on the comparison done for the plan we are understaffed based on the acreage we have. Amman asked Soderberg if there is something she sees in other communities where they keep staff longer. Are there ideas on how others have, maintain, and fund their staff? Soderberg stated that the approach is to be smarter and more efficient with what we have. An example is reducing mowing. More communities today are in a similar place as Ashland. Chair Amman stated that he thinks the plan is good and that it is hard to get that feedback loop showing people are using these facilities, spending money here, etc.

Soderberg stated that Ashland has unique elements that set it apart and draw people to the community. Chair Amman posed the question of how can we bring the financial reality aspect to the plan and pare it with the visionary element. Balance a need for fiscal responsibility with vision.

Gehred stated that she thinks a lot about playgrounds. How about when we have to replace playground equipment we do a Montessori or European approach and this could be attractive for younger children or disadvantaged children. Celebrate our parks with who we are. Portray the City as succeeding. We need more help.

JoAnn Erickson asked to speak and explained that she lives on City Heights Road and serves on the Plan Commission. She has been here almost 30 years. She loves Gehred's Friends of the Park idea. She is not a fan of how we have let Bay City and the City Dock overgrow. She stated that we can't just put out a blanket statement saying we need volunteers. We need to call them or meet them on the street. It makes them feel needed. We have stifled volunteers but now since we don't have workers we want volunteers. We can train these folks. We have a fantastic group of volunteers. We have to make them feel validated. Most volunteers just want a thank you and for you to treat them nicely. She loves the plaza park here and the black rock there but there are weeds growing and Erickson is almost afraid to do anything because she doesn't know which plantings are good and which are garbage plants. Why spend money and let things go to pop?

Discussion concluded on the proposed Parks Master Plan. Soderberg stated that she will take the feedback form tonight and incorporate it in the revised plan. She will connect with Hudson to talk about specific areas of the plan to expand upon and change based on the feedback. The planning team will determine whether to take the draft plan to Council on Dec 10th or in the New Year. We want to see the plan adopted in early 2025 either in January or March. Soderberg and Hudson thanked everyone for attending.

VI. Comments and Questions

There were no comments or questions.

VII. Adjourn

Chair Amman asked for a motion to adjourn. Seefeldt moved and Weiler seconded. The meeting adjourned at 7:28 pm.

Recorded by:

Steven D. Wiley, AICP
Planning and Development Director