

A Vision for the Future of Bryan Park

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In 2003 and 2004 a group of Bryan Park neighbors convened in a committee jointly sponsored by both the Elm Heights Neighborhood Association and the Bryan Park Neighborhood Association. The committee held a series of meetings to discuss and devise a long-term vision for the future of Bryan Park.

The Bloomington Department of Parks and Recreation (“Parks Department”) considers Bryan Park a “community park” because of the city-wide appeal of special events, the pool, sports facilities, and other amenities. We agree that the park appropriately provides recreational opportunities to users throughout the city. However, Bryan Park is also our neighborhood park. It represents a core resource for our neighborhood, a centerpiece of community events, and a critical “greenspace” for our local environment.

This vision reflects a consensus of what the neighbors of Bryan Park would like to see. While we realize that the Parks Department answers to other constituencies as well, the purpose of this document is to lay out broad management ideas that are in keeping with our vision for the long-term health of our community. We developed and adopted this vision with the expectation that the Parks Department will consider our views as representative of the core communities that surround Bryan Park and, as such, deserving of special consideration in park management.

On the whole, it is fair to say that the Bryan Park neighbors love their park and would prefer it stay relatively undisturbed rather than transformed in any substantial way. We neighbors feel privileged to have one of Bloomington’s great park jewels at our doorsteps. Nonetheless, we see some serious threats to the park and have some suggestions for improving it. This vision lays out some of our broad ideas. We expect this document to lay the groundwork for future discussions with Parks Department staff.

Community Engagement: from Vision to Reality

An overarching theme of our discussions centers on mechanisms to improve communications between residents of the Bryan Park area and the Parks Department. We believe this is critical. How do we translate our vision for the future of Bryan Park into reality? The key is long-range planning and continuing citizen involvement.

We believe that it is essential for the Parks Department to develop a long-range plan to guide the future development and management of Bryan Park. In the past, projects have been implemented with minimal criteria to govern the appropriateness of the activity, its location, or the design. A long-range planning process with the participation of the neighbors (as well as other citizens) would provide a framework that could be used to evaluate future proposals. As the city embarks

on a major planning and development process for the McDoel Switchyard, we fear its attention to scarce, core parks may be diverted. Bryan Park ought to have a master plan as well. Without one, well intentioned projects may cumulatively deteriorate the Bryan Park experience. A long range plan will also help the Parks Department establish priorities for capital improvements in the park. For instance, while some parking lots at Bryan Park do need work, our group believes that the riparian (creekside) vegetation restoration ought to take a higher priority.

We encourage the Parks Department to solicit public participation in planning and in project design. Many of us were surprised to see the new creekside east-west path developed and the existing gravel path paved a few years ago. We request that the Parks Department afford the neighbors the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting the park. We are eager to collaborate with the Parks Department. Neighbors have a lot to offer: professional expertise, community monitoring, and contributions to park improvements (both volunteer labor and fund-raising). We recommend that the Parks Department designate one of its officials as the “Bryan Park Steward,” who can act as a primary contact for issues related to Bryan Park management. This will encourage neighbors to get more involved with making suggestions and reporting problems. It will also give voice to the needs of Bryan Park within the Parks Department.

Our joint Elm Heights Neighborhood Association and the Bryan Park Neighborhood Association vision committee will continue to meet periodically and will be available as a sounding board for park planning and management.

Opportunities and Threats

In considering the long-range future of Bryan Park, we believe that the Parks Department should build on existing strengths. For us, the most valuable opportunities for improving Bryan Park are:

- 1) retaining and enlarging areas of unpaved ground not dedicated to any one particular use – this promotes a diversity of unstructured uses and offers a contrast to the hard surfaces and order of the city;
- 2) expanding and enhancing native vegetation restoration; and
- 3) maintaining a neighborhood hub for community events and strolling.

This vision document expands on these three opportunities below.

At the same time, we have identified three principal threats that we believe pose the greatest risk of frustrating our long-term vision for the park. Each of these threats presents itself today and has the potential for growing worse unless the managers of Bryan Park remain vigilant. The three chief threats are:

- 1) over-development (e.g. paths, structures, lights);
- 2) under-investment in restoration and soft landscaping; and
- 3) congestion and overcrowding.

This vision document expands on these three threats below.

The Issues

In this section of the report, we discuss the opportunities and threats in greater detail. The primary objective of this report is to articulate broad direction for Bryan Park. While we have strong agreement on the principles, we do not presume to plan exactly how the principles should be applied in practice. Our examples are illustrative only. They are not intended to constitute the blueprint for the future of the park. We hope to work with the Parks Department to develop a long-range plan founded on these principles and, further, to collaborate on its implementation.

Opportunities

1) retaining and enlarging areas of unpaved ground not dedicated to any one particular use – this promotes a diversity of unstructured uses and offers a contrast to the hard surfaces and order of the city

Our discussions frequently returned to the one salient attribute of Bryan Park that the neighbors valued above all others: it has space for unstructured activities. Rather than view these areas not dedicated to ball fields, shelters, playgrounds, etc. as the spaces “in between,” neighbors view these areas as the core of the park. We want to ensure that there remains ample space to wander off trails, without direction. Opportunities for informal gatherings, inventive play, and quiet reflection all rely on the “undedicated” parts of the park. The mix of grass and trees to the north of the creek, between the tennis and basketball courts, represents the heart and soul of Bryan Park for this reason. It inspires people to improvise play and relaxation rather than just consuming or participating in it. We believe that it should suffer no further encroachment. Long-range plans should enhance and expand this part of the park rather than diminish its qualities.

2) expanding and enhancing native vegetation restoration

We applaud the park department’s recent efforts to expand and enhance native vegetation restoration along the creeks. The restoration of native vegetation along the eastern part of the Bryan Park Creek is important for environmental education, improving the atmosphere of the park, and cleaning/moderating the run-off from the park. The transformation of a relatively unsightly ditch to the lush riparian zone is an ongoing and exciting project. Already, park users are seeing an increase in the numbers of birds. We would like to see Bryan Park as a neighborhood leader in native plant landscaping. The park experience affects neighbors who

visit. If the vegetative restoration is left to languish for lack of funds, then it will look awful and prove to skeptics its infeasibility. If the park does an excellent, showcase-level job of revegetating the area, then it will ripple through the neighborhood and create a healthier habitat for people and wildlife throughout the city. The Parks Department should commit to making this demonstration project succeed. This is a critical, immediate need. We view this as the top priority for capital expenditure. The Parks Department should invest in expanding the project to the entire creek and its major tributary, and ensure that the project is successfully completed.

3) maintaining a neighborhood hub for events and strolling

To serve as a neighborhood hub, the park should have a mixture of programmed events (such as concerts and reserved parties at shelters) and room for spontaneous gatherings. An important issue that came up repeatedly in our deliberations is the need for safer pedestrian access to the park. For example, a stop sign at the intersection of Allen and Henderson streets is essential for safe crossing from the Bryan Park neighborhood to the west of Bryan Park into the park. Also essential are painted crosswalks across Woodlawn, Maxwell, and Henderson, along all the feeder streets. Drivers on all three of those streets should get the *feeling* that they are driving along a park even if they are just passing by. Other pedestrian-friendly traffic planning should be implemented, including “Children at Play” signs, and traffic calming. As neighbors, we insist on safe, low-stress pedestrian access to the park. If it is too much of an effort to stroll to the park, people will only do it if they have a clear destination. For community-building to work, people need to be attracted to the park for the sake of the walk itself. That means we must pay attention not just to the park experience, but also to the experience of getting to the park.

Beyond safety, we think that the park should extend its tendrils into the neighborhoods. The Parks Department should continue to work on the grassy creekside corridor between Southdowns and Sheridan as an extension of Bryan Park. In particular, safer pedestrian ways and native vegetation restoration would help extend the reach of the park to the east and create a popular promenade. To the west, Allen Street may provide a critical corridor to connect Bryan Park with the new McDoel Switchyard park. We would like residents of the Bryan Park and Elm Heights neighborhoods to move easily between the two parks along a safe and attractive street. The Parks Department will have to work more collaboratively with the city’s Public Works Department to tie together these two parks in a way that links them effectively. This would also reduce the need for parking lots at McDoel, as people from the east would walk there.

Threats

1) over-development (e.g. paths, structures, lights)

For a park of its size, we believe that Bryan Park has too much paved surface. It has by far the largest proportion of paved surface to park area of any of the city’s parks. Olcott Park, of comparable size to Bryan Park, has 50 parking spaces (plus 179 spaces nearby at the Jackson Creek School), while Bryan Park has 350 spaces (plus many spaces nearby at the city-rented

Carlisle factory lot). Given its urban setting, neighbors seek the park as a break from pavement. We should strive to reduce the amount of paved surface in the park, especially in the central area between Woodlawn and Henderson. Parking lots within this boundary should not be expanded.

One of the most aesthetically displeasing aspects of the development in the park is the attendant lighting. This issue came up frequently as neighbors complained about the glare and brightness of lights around the pool and tennis courts especially. The lighting fixtures installed after the recent upgrade of Bryan Park Pool aim the light out instead of down and provide a most uncomfortable glare for the surrounding neighbors at night. Full-cutoff lighting fixtures would eliminate glare for anyone who looks at the lights from the side. Improvement in the lighting facilities are urgently needed. These might include modifications to the number and intensity of lighting fixtures, redirection of lighting downward, and timed lighting units.

The present street lighting in the park, while less objectionable, still leaves much to be desired in the area of aesthetics as well as safety. A careful and well thought out lighting plan needs to be developed that provides for safety at night without making the park totally unusable for star gazing and quiet reflection. The conversion to full cutoff lighting would greatly enhance the park experience at night without compromising safety. In fact it would enhance it. More pleasing light fixtures along the trails but placed closer to the ground would be a great enhancement in safety and aesthetics. Here is another opportunity for the park to serve as a demonstration site illustrating state-of-the-art improvements in night lighting. Bryan Park would be an excellent pilot project.

2) under-investment in restoration and soft landscaping

The spending priorities of Bryan Park should include landscaping around the margins of the park, and creating an arboretum along the paths. One margin that needs work is the sidewalk along Henderson street. That sidewalk should be moved farther away from the street in places and planted with grand trees to create both an attractive park boundary and a buffer to make the pathway feel more like it is part of the park. In places, there is little demarcation between this path and parking spots.

We understand that the Parks Department is trying to reduce the amount of area that it must mow in the parks in order to reduce costs. There are still many opportunities in Bryan Park to do this. The areas around the edge of the park could be planted in a variety of deciduous and evergreen trees that would give the neighbors on the north and south sides of the park more privacy and not reduce the areas that are commonly used for recreation by park users.

In addition to the proposal to develop a vegetative buffer of trees along the northern and southern edges of the park, we recommend that the Parks Department develop a plan to integrate an arboretum into the park along the trails. This obviously is a long-range project in that it would take some years after planting for the trees to grow into mature specimens. But, within 20 or 30 years, we could have an arboretum that complements the one on the IU campus. A variety of native species would be desirable and would enhance the riparian native vegetation project.

3) congestion and overcrowding

As with all popular parks, Bryan Park faces the threat of a public loving it to death. A nice weekend afternoon during the warmer half of the year often brings overcrowding and congestion to a place that should offer respite from the “busy-ness” of our lives. On weekdays during the school year, the Park and Ride use of the Bryan Park lots contributes to this threat. The park and ride program has adverse impacts on the Bryan Park experience and infrastructure. Noise, air pollution, and pedestrian hazards are the chief problems stemming from the congestion generated by Park and Ride.