

## **History of the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary (BWS)**

### **Introduction**

The Blaine Wetland Sanctuary is a 500+ acre Open Space. Since the city acquired the property, careful thought and consideration has been put into the site to make it an amazing amenity for the residents of Blaine and the surrounding region. It has provided an opportunity to educate the public about the importance of ecological restoration as well as offer many recreational opportunities throughout the boardwalk and trails. The need for a comprehensive chronology of how the site has been developed and what is planned for the future at the site is another step towards keeping this a unique asset for the city and its residents.

The chronology is broken up into sections that highlight the early history; the Northern Portion, which is known as Site 7 to the permitting agencies; the Central Portion, which is known as Branch 3 to the permitting agencies; the Southern Portion; future plans, and budget.

### **Early History**

- In the late 1980s, the city received a donation of 435 acres of land in exchange for park dedication fees.
  - The 435 acres of land created the city's 7th Open Space now known as the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary (BWS).
  - This site was envisioned to be a wetland classroom.
- The city created an Open Space Committee in the 1990s to begin an open space and trail plan.
  - The committee had a Natural Resource Inventory (NRI) completed in 1999 for the entire city, a Trail Corridor Study, and a survey to determine citywide support.
  - Based on the results of the survey, the city council put a bond referendum on the ballot in November 2000. The referendum asked voters if the city could issue \$3.5 million in general obligation bonds to finance the acquisition of land from willing sellers, for the conservation of natural open spaces, protection of water and air quality, preservation of wildlife habitat areas, and to provide walking and hiking trails, with all acquisitions based on the recommendations of a citizens advisory committee and subject to an annual audit. The referendum passed 54 percent voting in favor.
  - On May 17, 2001 through Resolution 01-88, the Natural Resource Conservation Board (NRCB) was appointed by Blaine City Council to begin work on recommending to the city council which properties should be preserved for open space and trails.
- The first purchase with the bond funds by the city was in 2003.
  - This purchase included a 62 acre wetland and 8 acre oak forest in The Lakes development.
  - The 62 acre wetland purchase added to the existing 435 wetland acres the city already owned.
- Research work began at the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary in 2006 by the city's consultant to establish restoration monitoring plots within the northern section and in the middle section of the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.

- The research work continued in 2007 and staff along with the consultant began discussing the viability of creating a wetland bank in these two areas of the site.
- In 2009, 9.2 acres off Lexington Avenue was purchased for a future public access point to the 500 acres of open space.
- On March 20, 2014, the city council hired a consultant to develop a detailed conceptual plan of improvements (trails and other amenities) for the large, 500 acre open space west of Lexington Avenue and north of 109<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

### **Central Portion (Branch 3) Timeline**

- December 18, 2008 - EDA Resolution 08-21, the city and Rice Creek Watershed District entered into a Joint Powers Agreement to study the Central Portion (Branch 3) to determine if it was eligible for a wetland bank.
- November 18, 2009 - EDA Resolution 10-15, to hire a consultant to initiate the wetland bank permitting process for Central Portion (Branch 3). This was the first wetland banking site in the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.
- January – March 2010 - Restoration activities began for the Central Portion (Branch 3) wetland bank. Restoration work entailed winter tree/shrub removal, mowing, dethatching, and treating invasive species.
- 2010 - The construction of a water control structure was completed to restore the hydrology to the site.
- 2010 – 2014 - Five years of maintenance was required to establish the EDA wetland bank along with annual reporting to the regulatory agencies. This area will require continuous maintenance to keep invasive species out.
- September 4, 2014 - The first sale of wetland credits for Central Portion (Branch 3).
- The wetland bank has generated 55 acres of wetland credits for the EDA to sell.
- Wetland credit sales from the Central Portion (Branch 3) wetland bank remain with the EDA and support economic development in the City of Blaine.

### **Northern Portion (Site 7) Timeline**

- March 20, 2014 - The city council hired a consultant through January 2021 to complete the wetland banking project for the Northern Portion, the second wetland banking site, also known as the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary Improvement Project No. 14-10.
  - The newly proposed banking project was funded by the Open Space and Trails Fund, with a potential of generating credits valued between \$1.8 and \$4.4 million. This would fund the maintenance of open spaces for many years to come without putting pressure on the General Fund.
- May - June 2014 - City newsletter provided information about the plans for the Northern Portion of the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.
- December 4, 2014 - The city council hired a consultant to complete the final design of the first phase of the open space improvements for the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.
- 2014 - Meetings were held with the Technical Evaluation Panel (TEP) consisting of members from the Rice Creek Watershed District, Anoka Conservation District, Board of Water and Soil Resources, Department of Natural Resources, and the Army Corps of Engineers to review the Wetland Bank Plan Scoping Document for the Northern Portion (Site 7), which is the first step towards creating a wetland bank.
- 2014 – 2016 - Meetings with the TEP continued.

- April 30, 2015 - A community meeting was held to gather input on the concept plan for the entire Blaine Wetland Sanctuary. Approximately 50 people attended and provided comments on the plan.
- May 7, 2016 - A wetland information event was held at East Lake Park with information about the entire Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.
- August 5, 2016 - The Wetland Bank Plan Full Application for the Northern Portion (Site 7) was submitted to the TEP
- November 2, 2016 – Meeting held to discuss the next steps. The TEP gave verbal approval to move forward with the restoration work on the Northern Portion (Site 7) at the meeting.
- December 15, 2016 - Staff presented an update to the city council on the next steps for the Northern Portion (Site 7) of the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary. In this update, the Council was informed that restoration work would be starting in January 2017 and wetland credits would be available January 1, 2018 – 15 percent maximum total = 12 acres.
- December 15, 2016 - EDA authorized a loan to the Blaine Open Space Fund to provide funding to get the Northern Portion (Site 7) project off the ground.
- January 15, 2017(Approximately) - Restoration activities began in the Northern Portion (Site 7) of the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.
- January 19, 2017 - March 2018 - Several meetings, notifications to the community, and site visits were held with residents and the city council about the restoration activities in the Northern Portion (Site 7). A Neighborhood Committee was also formed.
- March 2018 – April 2018 - Restoration activities resumed to finish mowing and raking.
- Winter 2018/2019 - The remaining trees were removed when the ground was frozen.
- Annual on-going maintenance activities will occur at this site. Those activities will include monitoring, herbicide treatments, prescribed burns, native vegetation re-establishment if needed, and mowing.
- The Northern Portion (Site 7) wetland bank has been a multi-year project and was included on many council workshop and council meeting agendas. Also, many Natural Resource Conservation Board agendas and several city newsletter articles. Local media including the Star Tribune, North Metro TV, and ABC Newspapers covered the restoration work. Open houses took place at Blaine City Hall and at East Side Park. A BWS specific webpage was created on the city website.

### **Southern Portion Timeline**

- 2016 - The Anoka Sandplain Partnership applied for grant funds from the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Funds to restore the southern portion of the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary.
- 2017 - The grant application was approved.
  - Great River Greening, a partner of the Anoka Sandplain Partnership, manages the grant funds for the restoration of the southern portion
- October 2019 - Public meetings were held at Blaine City Hall. Notice of the meeting was sent by mail to all surrounding properties and was posted online.
- January 2020 - Restoration work began after council approval and with changes implemented after resident feedback.
- Winter 2021 - Restoration work to be finished.
- Annual on-going maintenance planned for the area

## **Cost Information**

### Interpretive Signs

- Students at Anoka Ramsey Community College compiled the content for seven interpretive signs, as a part of their coursework. City staff and other professionals worked to complete the design, fabrication, and installation of the signs.
- Installation price - \$10,909 for all seven signs
- Sign sponsorships - \$5,500 (4 of the 7 signs have been sponsored, two from Walter's Refuse and Recycling, one from Rice Creek Watershed District, and one from Critical Connections Ecological Services)
- Additional sign sponsorships could be added in the future.

### Central Portion (Branch 3)

- The EDA spent approximately \$600,000 over five years on the first wetland banking site Central Portion (Branch 3). The total Central Portion is 103 acres with 55 acres available for wetland credit sale.
- To date 21 acres have been sold, leaving 34 acres remaining.
- The EDA has sold approximately \$2.35 million in wetland credits – price of credits has ranged from \$0.65-\$2.00/square feet.
- Ongoing maintenance as required in the wetland bank permit (prescribed burns, mowing, raking, inter-seeding, spot herbicide treatments) has an approximate cost of \$50,000 per year.

### Northern Portion (Site 7)

- The city will spend approximately \$1.4 million through an existing contract through January 2021 on the Northern Portion (Site 7) restoration. The Northern Portion, which includes the second wetland bank project known as Site 7, includes a total area of 171.53 acres. The wetland bank will include up to 81 acres that will be eligible for credit sales if the site restoration is complete in compliance with the original application and accepted by the governing regulatory agencies.
- Credits in the Northern Portion (Site 7) have sold mainly in the range of \$2.50/square feet and could be worth approximately \$8.8 million if the remaining credits sell at \$2.50/square feet
- Currently there are 8 acres of credits available in the Northern Portion. To date 15 acres of credits have been sold and an additional 58 acres will be available in the future. Credit release amounts are based on performance of the site.
- Ongoing maintenance as required in the wetland bank permit (prescribed burns, mowing, raking, interseeding, spot herbicide treatments) has an approximate cost of \$75,000 per year through 2040.

### Southern Portion

- The city council approved an expenditure of \$20,000 as a local match for Southern Portion grant funds.
- Ongoing maintenance of the Southern Portion is estimated at \$30,000 per year.

## Future Budget Estimates

- Entrance Sign at 11980 Lexington Ave – \$125,000
- Additional Interpretive Signs (7-10) - \$15,000 for 10 signs (will allow for sponsorships)
- Interpretive Shelter/Center
  - \$500,000 for shelter
  - \$2 million for interpretive center plus
    - \$100,000 for sewer and water
    - Staffing costs (3 full-time staff)
    - Utility costs
    - IT costs
    - Cleaning costs
- Trail connections – \$6-7 million (completed in phases)
- Maintenance of parking lot, boardwalk and gravel trails
- Programming – costs depend on number of attendees and type of program

## Revenue-Expense Summary

Portion	Revenues	Expenses (20 Years)	Future Project Expenses
Northern	\$1,554,282 past Credit Sales	\$1.4M Restoration	Entrance Monument Sign \$125k
(Site 7)	\$8.8M-\$10.6M Future Credit Sales	\$1.5M Maintenance	Interpretive Signage \$15k
	(\$2.50/sf - \$3.00/sf)	(\$75k/Yr)	
			Trails \$6M - \$7M
Central	\$872,853.40 past Credit Sales	\$600k Restoration	Shelter \$500k
(Branch 3)	\$3.7M-\$4.5M Future Credit Sales	\$1M Maintenance	
	(\$2.50/sf - \$3.00/sf)	(\$50k/Yr)	Interpretive Center \$2M
			\$100k Water/Sewer
Southern	\$20k Matching Grant	\$20k Restoration	Staffing (3 FTE)
		\$600k Maintenance	Utility Costs
		(\$30k/Yr)	IT Costs
			Cleaning/Maintenance

## Future Plans

### Future Trails

- Amend wetland banking permits for Central Portion (Branch 3) and Northern Portion (Site 7) to allow a trail connection to the southern portion.
- Develop comprehensive trail plan utilizing existing neighborhood connections.
- Receive community input on trail locations.
- Begin construction of trails.

### Future Structure

- Construct a building or shelter at the 11980 Lexington Avenue parking lot along with entrance sign.
- Entrance sign has been designed and is expected to be installed in 2021.
- If a building is selected, look for opportunities to extend sewer and water to 11980 Lexington Avenue to construct an interpretive center.

### Future Maintenance

- Continue ongoing maintenance in all sections of the BWS with prescribed burns, interseeding with desirable vegetation, raking, and mowing. Spot herbicide treatments in areas not responding to other maintenance measures to control invasive species. Removal of remove dead and diseased trees.

- Continue partnerships with volunteer groups to control invasive species.

#### Future Signs

- Install additional interpretive signs and secure additional sponsors to fund the signs.

#### Continue Environmental Programming

- Programming is being planned for all age groups.
- Low cost opportunities are being programmed through Blaine Park and Recreation.
- Programs are well received by the residents with additional requests for more environmental programming.
- Year round programming scheduled for the BWS including snowshoeing, winter walks, walking storybook, and more.

#### **Continue Partnerships**

- Anoka Conservation District
- Anoka Ramsey Community College
- Aveda
- Board of Water and Soil Resources
- Boy & Girl Scout troops
- Church groups
- Department of Natural Resources
- Growing Green Hearts
- Rice Creek Watershed District
- St. Cloud State University
- Spring Lake Park School District
- Wargo Nature Center
- University of Minnesota