



City of Blaine Anoka County, Minnesota

Blaine City Hall
10801 Town Sq Dr NE
Blaine MN 55449

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Date	Ver.	Action By	Action	Result
8/8/2022	1	City Council Workshop		

Workshop - Megan Hedstrom, Stormwater Coordinator

Title

Discuss Potential Pioneer Park Preservation Project

History and Status

In November of 2000, Blaine voters passed a bond referendum to fund the preservation of significant natural areas and trail corridors. The Natural Resource Conservation Board was formed, and the city began using referendum funds to acquire natural areas for preservation and creating trail corridors. In 2007, the city approved the Blaine Open Space Management Plan, which detailed numerous projects to be completed to increase the environmental and recreational value of the city's open spaces. The full project list is below, and wetland restoration projects are in bold. Pioneer Park projects are underlined.

1. Increase stormwater infiltration throughout the city
2. Pioneer Park fen
3. **Site 7 northern wetland complex (Blaine Wetland Sanctuary)**
4. Pioneer Park oak forest invasive species removal
5. **Sites 8-9 wet meadows and prairie (Kane Meadows)**
6. Laddie Lake Park oak savanna and oak woodland
7. **Expand fens and wetlands**
8. Site 7 buckthorn control (Blaine Wetland Sanctuary)
9. Site 5 buckthorn removal (Legacy Woods)
10. Lochness Lake - protect woodland from buckthorn
11. Site 4 (Hidden Ponds) and Laddie Lake buckthorn removal

In 2014, the city approved the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary Master Plan. In order to fund projects established in this plan, the 3rd project from the Open Space Management Plan was prioritized over

the Pioneer Park fen restoration. Between 2014-2017 the city worked to begin wetland restoration in the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary and initiate the Site 7 wetland bank. Revenues from this bank have now covered the initial establishment cost and have further funded trail and asset development.

On August 2, 2018, staff brought the opportunity of conducting a similar wetland restoration project in Pioneer Park to a Council Workshop and received direction to move forward with a consultant to assemble a draft plan for a wetland restoration project, including information on a potential wetland bank. This draft plan was presented at the November 8, 2018 Council Workshop, and council consensus directed staff to pursue a wetland bank at Pioneer Park. At the February 7, 2019 meeting, council approved an agreement between the city and the watershed district to move the project forward, and at the February 21, 2019 meeting a contract with a consultant was approved authorizing the consultant to conduct a wetland delineation and complete a Prospectus report. A Prospectus is one of the first steps to begin a wetland bank. Work on the Prospectus was conducted over 2019 and 2020. The Prospectus report identified a preliminary extent of tree removal. At the April 6, 2020 Council Meeting, council indicated that the tree removals in the wetland and upland area were a primary concern, and directed staff to reduce tree impacts wherever possible. The Prospectus was approved with the recommendation that neighborhood meetings be held and tree removals be re-examined. After hearing many concerns regarding tree removals, the project was paused so that the tree removal and wetland impacts could be evaluated in more detail. A comprehensive tree survey was performed by the consultant. A wetland banking 101 workshop was held with Council on June 14, 2021. The potential project was brought back to Council on January 3rd for further discussion. Specifics on tree removals were discussed.

There are 3 steps to creating a wetland bank: Draft Prospectus, Prospectus, and Mitigation Plan. The current status of a potential wetland bank in Pioneer Park is that a draft Prospectus and a Prospectus have been submitted to the Board of Water and Soil Resources. Per direction from council, no work has begun on a formal mitigation plan.

Pioneer Park Wetland Restoration and Tree Removal

In the original Open Space Management Plan, the second priority project is to conduct wetland restoration in Pioneer Park and the fourth priority project is to manage the upland forest areas of Pioneer Park. After being left unmanaged for 15 further years, the existing wetland and upland forest has become overgrown, which has had a negative impact on the native and rare plant species in the wetland as well as the tree species in the upland forested area. The two projects identified in the Open Space Management plan are proposed to be combined into one wetland and upland restoration project. The benefits for these restoration projects have two primary functions, environmental and aesthetic improvements. By resuming active land management, this area has the potential to once again become a host to rare plants that can only thrive in the Anoka Sandplain, and support a healthy, diverse, and long-lasting forest. Aesthetically, viewing Pioneer Park from either the west or south or from along the trails inside the park, the forest area is surrounded by a dense canopy of dead ash trees. Removing these trees will open visibility of the healthy native oak and maple trees, while maintaining a dense vegetated buffer for the properties to the north and east.

This project also has the potential of addressing safety concerns in Pioneer Park. The dead canopy of ash trees poses a significant fire safety concern. Dead and diseased trees along the trail corridors have also been identified for removal due to the hazards they pose to park and trail users.

The area targeted for restoration is primarily in the southwestern portion of Pioneer Park. This area is primarily a rich fen wetland, bordered by wet forest, with an upland area of oak woodland. If the city

chooses to proceed with any kind of restoration project, regardless of a wetland bank establishment, the first step of land management in this area is to address the degrading tree population. A tree survey was conducted by the hired consultant in 2021. 3,286 trees were identified in the proposed project area. Staff has received 3 quotes, for budgeting purposes only, from a tree removal contractor detailing a few potential options.

Option 1: Removal of dead and diseased ash trees. Removal of dead trees along the trail corridor. This option would include the removal of approximately 1,300 ash trees in the wetland area and an additional 570 dead or diseased trees along the trail corridors in the park.

Option 1 addresses the aesthetic issues in the park, and begins to make impact on the oak forest and wetland restoration projects while increasing safety for trail users.

Estimated Cost of Option 1: \$484,752

Option 2: This option includes all tree removals identified in Option 1. Additionally, Option 2 includes the removal of invasive tree species from the wetland area of Pioneer Park. This option includes the removal an additional 725 invasive trees in the wetland area. Invasive tree species primarily include quaking aspen, boxelder, paper birch and buckthorn.

Option 2 aligns with the projects originally identified in the Open Space Management Plan to restore the oak forest upland area in Pioneer Park and begin wetland restoration in the rich fen. Option 2 puts the city a position to potentially begin a wetland bank in the future. Option 2 also includes the hazardous trail trees and increases safety for trail users.

Estimated Cost of Option 2: \$612,890

Option 3: In year 1, remove the 1,300 dead and diseased ash trees and the 570 dead trees along the trail corridor. At a later date to be determined, re-mobilize a tree contractor to Pioneer Park to conduct invasive tree removal to further improve the oak forest, or as part of the establishment of a wetland bank.

Option 3 allows for immediate work to occur on removing the dead ash trees, to allow the forest to begin re-establishment. Without removing invasive tree species, it's likely the cleared areas will be populated with fast-growing invasive species, not the quality natives like oaks and maples, but the city would be in a position to complete further restoration at a later date. Option 3 also includes the removal of the hazardous trail trees and increases safety for trail users.

Estimated Cost of Option 3: \$650,890

Estimated costs were provided by a tree contractor that has conducted work for the city in the past. These costs also include the grubbing of all tree stumps. \$300,000 is identified in the 2022 Open Space Capital Improvement Project budget for restoration work in Pioneer Park. The city budgets \$350,000 a year for ash tree removal but this funding source is typically spent on boulevard tree management.

Wetland Banking

In addition to environmental and aesthetic value, wetland restoration projects provide the ability to generate revenue. The initial referendum money has all been spent. Thirty-five percent of park

dedication fees collected from residential development is dedicated to the open space fund, and this money is typically spent on asset development in the open spaces, not land management.

If the city wishes to invest in restoration of natural areas, a wetland bank provides the opportunity to recover investment cost and generate further revenue for other projects. Through the development of both the LD3 EDA wetland bank and the Site 7 Blaine Wetland Sanctuary wetland bank, wetland restoration has been identified by the city as the highest and best use of this land. Because of the Wetland Conservation Act there is no opportunity for other park development on the wetland.

Establishing a wetland bank in Pioneer Park would provide a funding source to conduct these two priority projects from the Open Space Management Plan. If a wetland bank is ultimately not established, an alternative funding source would need to be identified for these projects to occur. The Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) administers and regulates the sale and revenue of wetland banks in Minnesota. BWSR requires that banks are monitored and maintained for a pre-determined period post-establishment, but otherwise has no restrictions on how revenues are spent. In the past, the city's policy has been that money generated from the wetland bank should be spent in the open space that generated the wetland bank. For example, any revenue generated by the Site 7 (Blaine Wetland Sanctuary) bank would be spent in the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary. If pursued, any revenue from a wetland bank in Pioneer Park could be used to conduct other park improvements like trail and bridge improvements and trail system expansion. The city council could review revising the internal policy that funding remains in the open space it is generated in, to open this revenue up to conduct other priority Open Space Management Plan projects.

Wetland Bank Cost and Revenue Projections

It is estimated that establishing a wetland bank in Pioneer Park would cost \$900,000. This estimate includes tree removal, restoration of hydrologic function in the wetland, and monitoring and management of plant and tree species. Based on the size of the wetland, the city's experience in wetland banking, and the current sale price and demand for wetland credits, the bank could generate \$4.6 million of revenue. A 10-year projection is shown below. The city typically budgets \$20,000 - \$25,000 a year for monitoring/management in the Blaine Wetland Sanctuary. The Pioneer Park site is significantly smaller, so staff estimates a budget of \$15,000-\$20,000 per year would be necessary after initial establishment. If the bank is set up similar to the Site 7 (Blaine Wetland Sanctuary) bank, the Board of Water and Soil Resources would require the city monitor and maintain the wetland for at least 10 years after the final credits are issued. Assuming the bank establishment period will take 5 years, a basic estimate of cost and revenue projection can be seen in the table below.

Item	Cost	Revenue
Initial Establishment	\$900,000	
Annual Maintenance - 15 years at \$20,000 a year	\$300,000	
Credit Sale		\$4,644,000
Total	\$1,200,000	\$4,644,000

These projections are based on experiences with wetland banking in the city, and estimates provided by consultants and contractors. If the city were to proceed with establishing a wetland bank, more detailed budgets would be put together prior to moving forward with any formal bank application.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Many projects were identified in the original Open Space Master Plan and many have not been completed. Funding sources are limited and competitive for these projects, so staff has prioritized wetland restoration as these projects can generate their own income, which avoids the need for any tax-payer impact.

A wetland restoration and oak forest restoration have been identified as environmental and aesthetic improvements in Pioneer Park. To conduct these projects, the first step is to manage trees in the southwestern portion of the park. Depending on the extent and timing of this project, it is estimated to cost between \$484,752 and \$650,890. Establishing a wetland bank could generate revenue of \$4,644,000 which could be the funding source for this project.

This item was brought to workshop via the Council Requested Items for Discussion. Staff will provide a presentation detailing the tree removal options as well as the wetland restoration and wetland banking information. Topics for which Council may choose to provide direction include:

- Tree removal option, if any, to proceed with
- Funding source(s) if a tree removal option proceeds
- Wetland bank establishment