



## **2023 Environmental Resources Advisory Council Annual Report**

### **2023 Initiatives and Topics of Interest**

- Construction Project Updates
- Long-term Restoration Projects
- Bicentennial Bond Tree Planting Project Phase II
- Management Plan Updates
- Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Deer Management
- Trail Improvements
- Education & Outreach

### **Construction Project Updates (Bicentennial Gateway, Griffy Loop Trail Loop Trail, & Rogers Family Park)**

In 2023, ERAC members received updates and were asked to provide feedback on several construction projects. A substantial amount of time was devoted to three specific projects: the Bicentennial Gateway Project, Griffy Lake Loop Trail Development, and Rogers Family Park Development.

Using funds from the Bicentennial Bond approved by the Common Council in 2018, BPRD is planning to install a new gateway element at the north end of Miller-Showers Park in the triangle of land between College Avenue, Walnut Street, and the Old State Road 37 crossover. ERAC members were invited to submit feedback on the gateway design. After several rounds of public comment, the City announced plans to move forward with the redesigned concept for the North Gateway. This design incorporates stacked limestone blocks approximately 10' high and the word "Bloomington" in backlit letters mounted to the limestone. The final design also includes space for a public art installation, a feature consistently requested by community members. The Bloomington Arts Commission will collaborate with Parks and Recreation to solicit design proposals and select the final art installation concept. ERAC members will continue to provide feedback on native plant installations and several invasive Callery pear tree removals that will occur on-site in relation to this project.

In 2020, BPRD staff presented the proposed Griffy Lake Loop Trail route to ERAC members along with plans for several trail connections and an accessible fishing pier. The first phase was completed in 2022 and included constructing an accessible pedestrian walkway along the west side of N. Headley Road to connect users to the south and north trail segments, as well as adding five fishing access points along the western shoreline. Additionally, this phase also constructed stairs and a 0.5-mile new hiking trail along the south shore, connecting the causeway to existing IU Research and Teaching Preserve trails. In 2023, BPRD hired Spectrum and Scenic Construction to begin work on the second and third phases of construction. Phase II of the project created an official trail across the top of the Griffy Lake Dam as well as a new set of stairs to improve access from the dam parking lot. The trail across the top of the dam is constructed out of packed quarter minus (gravel) and will connect to existing trails at the north and south ends of the dam. Phase II began in June 2023 and was completed in December 2023. Phase III involved constructing a new 4.5-mile hiking trail along the south shore of Griffy Lake, connecting the south end of the dam (Phase II) to the new causeway trail constructed as part of Phase I. Work on reestablishing and rerouting connector trails will continue in 2024. BPRD staff will continue to update ERAC members on the design plans, permit requirements, and construction progress for this project. A fourth phase of the project to improve the trails on the north shore is currently being planned.

In 2022, BPRD hired Scenic Construction to begin construction on the Goat Farm property using designs that were reviewed by ERAC members. Construction plans included adding a 10-spot permeable paver parking lot to increase public access to the park, the creation of a new paved trail, additional seating areas, barn and silo exterior improvements, and the installation of a new public art sculpture near the barn by local artist Jonathan Racek titled "FLEET/ing." The project also included more than a five-acre expansion of the native prairie. As part of the overall goal of preserving the park as passive, natural space, no overhead or parking lot lighting will be installed. BPRD hosted a dedication and ribbon-cutting in August 2023 to celebrate the completion of the Rogers Family Park project (formerly known as Goat Farm Park). ERAC members were asked to provide feedback throughout the project and were invited to attend the dedication ceremony.

## **Long-term Restoration Projects**

Throughout the year, ERAC members received updates on several long-term restoration projects taking place on BPRD property. These projects include updates from the Urban Forester on various tree plantings and removals, updates from the Urban Greenspace Manager on invasive plant management and native plant installations, as well as updates from the Nature Resources Manager on various trail and lake management projects. Specific project updates included: Bicentennial Bond Tree Planting Project Phase II, Prairie Restoration and Expansion at Rogers Family Park, Stiltgrass and Lesser Celandine Plant Management, Griffy Lake Aquatic Vegetation Management, BPRD Vegetation Dashboard, Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Prescribed Burn Project, and the Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Deer Browse Study. These projects support a variety of the City's current Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) and Climate Action Plan (CAP) goals. BPRD staff invited private contractors to present project results and allow ERAC members to ask questions regarding the process and outcomes. ERAC members continue to provide feedback and make recommendations for additional restoration projects. BPRD staff asked ERAC members to provide input and suggestions for addressing encroachment challenges along several park property lines, focusing on Winslow Woods Parks and Bloomington Rail Trail.

## **Bicentennial Bond Tree Planting Project - Phase II**

In 2018, Mayor Hamilton announced a series of Bicentennial bond projects to invest in the future of the City of Bloomington. Included in the Bicentennial bond was \$800,000 to plant trees along streets and in public rights-of-way across the city. Potential planting sites were identified by Davey Resource Group in 2019 as part of a city-wide inventory of street trees. The first round of approximately 265 tree plantings was completed in April/May 2022 and the second round of approximately 90 trees planted in October/November 2022. In 2023, efforts were focused on post-planting visits, updating the City's Tree Care Manual, adding more trees at Switchyard Park, and working with Planning and Transportation to update codes involving street tree plantings near utilities. BPRD also celebrated Arbor Day by planting approximately 6 trees at Switchyard Park and another 70 trees at RCA Community Park with the help of volunteers and partners from Canopy Bloomington. The Urban Forester attended several meetings to give ERAC members updates on tree installations and discuss ongoing Callery pear removals. In 2024, BPRD will continue to inspect city trees, assess risks, investigate planting sites, and replace more invasive trees. There are also plans to extend the tree planting efforts to include the installation of approximately 1000 trees in total throughout the City. BPRD is also working on applying for grants to help fund tree planting projects and maintenance needs on private property.

## **Management Plan Updates**

Throughout the year, ERAC members were asked to review and provide feedback on several Management Plans for properties including Miller-Showers Park, Park Ridge East Park, and Griffy Lake Nature Preserve. It was expressed by multiple ERAC members that gathering historical and anthropological information is required to have a complete understanding of the diverse history associated with BPRD properties. BPRD staff collected GIS data for all parks as well as started mapping vegetation management efforts. Moreover, there are ongoing maintenance requirements for managing the stormwater infrastructure at Miller-Showers Park, including a need to dredge the pond sediment that has accumulated in the first pond and removing trash from the filtration segments. CBU plans to coordinate a dredging project in 2024. The topographic survey results concluded there are serious erosion issues throughout Park Ridge East Park and will require additional plant management to address this concern. Trail system updates were made to the Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Master Plan based on a report submitted by Spectrum LLC. Spectrum is recommending the closure of most of the current trail system and the creation of new trails that consist of multiple loops. Many of the trails were built and designed in the 1980s or built by deer and people going where they want. Increased rainfall and overuse accelerate the erosion of the trails. After the Griffy Loop Trail project is complete, rerouting other existing trails will be considered. Additionally, BPRD asked Spectrum about the feasibility of developing an accessible loop trail route that follows the Wetland Trail and is accessible for wheelchairs and other mobility aids. Spectrum also recommended a system of directional trail signs that would help orient people on the trail. BPRD asked ERAC members to review the trail system report and share additional recommendations for trail management efforts at Griffy. Aquatic vegetation surveys were conducted by Aquatic Control in Griffy Lake with support from the Lake and River Enhancement (LARE) grant program. The information was used to make updates to the Griffy Lake Aquatic Vegetation Management Plan and inform managers of invasive plant pressure in the lake. The results from the two surveys were shared with ERAC members, and future management methods were discussed, including improving fish habitat along the newly constructed walkway. Terrestrial vegetation continues to be monitored annually by contracted field botanists from Eco Logic, LLC. Researchers are specifically tracking understory plant growth to indicate deer browse pressure. This data is used to inform decisions regarding deer management on the property as well as provide recommendations for sites that would benefit from future prescribed burns.

These management plans will continue to be revised annually, with the objective to set management goals and provide information required to maintain these greenspaces. In 2024, BPRD plans to share results from the Griffy Wetland Delineation and conduct an insect inventory throughout the preserve to help inform decision-making. Moreover, BPRD plans to make updates to the Leonard Springs Nature Park Management Plan.

## **Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Deer Management**

Deer management, once again, was a regular discussion topic at meetings. BPRD did not receive funding from IDNR's Community Hunting Access Program (CHAP) for deer management in 2023. However, with the support of the Park Board and ERAC members, BPRD was able to hire White Buffalo to plan and facilitate a hunt over two weekends during deer season. Once again, it was decided not to host a hunt the weekend after Thanksgiving because participation was low in past years and there was a demand from the public to keep the park open for hiking. White Buffalo has coordinated five hunts since the initial cull in 2017. The 2019 CHAP hunt removed 26 deer from the park, the 2020 CHAP hunt removed 40 deer, the 2021 CHAP program removed 47 deer, the 2022 hunt removed 46 deer, and the 2023 hunt removed 33 deer over two weekends. This decline may be attributed to warmer weather conditions, a decrease in the deer population, onsite construction projects, or other factors.

Under the supervision of White Buffalo, all 28 participants were required to pass a proficiency test and be properly licensed to hunt deer with firearms on the property. The number of participating hunters was

highest on the first day and decreased gradually in the subsequent days. To address the issue of declining hunter applications, the City is contemplating offsetting the costs associated with deer hunting and meat processing fees to incentivize more hunters to participate in the program. Bruce Wilds Security was hired by the BPRD to patrol the access points around the preserve and to advise members of the public of the temporary closure of the property during the hunt. Signs were placed conspicuously at parking areas and trailheads to inform the public of the closure of the property during the weekends of the hunt. Research and plant inventories conducted by Eco Logic continue to show that deer management is required to allow native plants to recover. Specifically, BPRD staff aim to reduce browse pressure on young oak and hickory saplings so that they can mature enough to support wildlife in the park and promote a diverse ecosystem. These native tree species are also desirable because they are more resilient to the pressures of climate change, such as droughts and high winds. ERAC members support long-term deer management at Griffy Lake Nature Preserve and will continue to annually review the vegetation monitoring results.

## **Trail Improvements**

During 2023, ERAC members were updated on trail development and improvement projects. While the Griffy Lake Loop Trail received the most attention, other trail updates were discussed, such as taking over the Jackson Creek Trail extension, B-Line Trail improvements, and Polly Grimshaw Trail responsibilities, as well as ongoing erosion and invasive plant management along other City trails.

The Jackson Creek Trail extension added an additional 1.5 miles of multiuse trail to improve the safety and mobility of pedestrians and bicyclists. The project makes connections to Jackson Creek Middle School, Childs Elementary School, Sherwood Oaks Park, Olcott Park, and Rogers Family Park. The Creek's Edge Trail is a 0.6-mile paved trail located off Sare Road in the Creek's Edge neighborhood. Future connections to the Jackson Creek Trail are planned for this trail section. This project supports goals outlined in both the City's SAP and CAP, which aim to connect existing greenspaces and provide additional access to residents.

The B-Line Trail had yellow painted lines added to the center to encourage users to stay to one side of the trail. LED lights were replaced along the trail, and labels were added to poles to help people identify their location along the trail. There are plans to add caution signs and paint sections along the trail, especially near the Grimes Bridge, to encourage users to reduce speed at intersections. BPRD has agreed to take over the management responsibilities for the Polly Grimshaw Trail from Public Works. The paved trail is located near Park Ridge Park along a railroad corridor. The trail will be trimmed back, snow removed, and maintained to BPRD standards for paved trails. Trail connections and development will continue to be discussed bi-monthly with ERAC members.

## **Education & Outreach**

At every meeting, ERAC members were updated on BPRD's education and outreach activities, such as Nature Days, Roving Naturalist Programs, Adopt-A-Stream/Greenspace/Trail Volunteers, and After-School Nature Club programs. Large community events, such as Bug Fest and Get Outdoors Day, welcomed hundreds of people and provided free opportunities to learn more about local outdoor recreational opportunities and the environment.

After several rounds of review from staff and ERAC members, BPRD designed nine interpretive signs at RCA Community Park. Five were replacements for worn signs that were no longer legible or had dated information. Four were new signs that highlighted the history of the property, park rules, and specific tree species that are common in the park. The signs were installed along the paved Early History Trail and the natural surface Interpretive Trail by Everywhere Signs in December 2023.

Furthermore, BPRD renewed its partnership with Monroe County-Identify and Reduce Invasive Species (MC-IRIS) to host weekly Weed Wrangle programs and to develop education opportunities about invasive plant management. In 2023, this program was expanded to allow for additional weekly Weed Wrangle programs at specific parks based on community engagement. The Urban Greenspace Outreach Coordinator presented the annual report to ERAC members to highlight the increase in volunteer hours and acres managed. The City's Vegetation Management Dashboard was presented to members, and they were asked to provide feedback on what other metrics BPRD should be tracking.

Moving forward in 2024, ERAC members will continue to provide feedback and recommendations on matters pertaining to the operations of natural areas, programs, and facilities.