



## **2020 Environmental Resources Advisory Council Annual Report**

### **2020 Initiatives and Topics of Interest**

- COVID-19 Impacts
- Interpretive Trail Applications
- Native Plant and Tree Installations
- Griffy Master Plan
- Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Deer Management
- Griffy Lake Loop Trail/ Griffy Accessible Fishing Pier

### **COVID-19 Impacts on Parks and Recreation**

On March 6, the state Department of Health confirmed Indiana's first case of coronavirus (COVID-19), a novel respiratory virus first identified in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. COVID-19 safety precautions were put in place by the direction of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) as well as Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) and local partners. To respond to the evolving public health situation, face masks, physical distancing, and quarantine requirements were put in place. Additionally, Governor Holcomb declared a state of emergency and ordered numerous actions including stopping all dine-in and bar services, closing all K-12 schools, prohibiting large social gatherings. The 'stay at home' order was in effect from March 25 through May 1. All non-essential businesses were ordered to stay closed or allow employees to work remotely from home. These measures were enforced locally to reduce the prospect of COVID-19 transmission. All large events and public programs offered by the City of Bloomington had to be cancelled. Playgrounds, pools, sports courts, and exercise equipment had to be closed off. Restrooms were locked and water fountains never turned on in the parks.

During the 'stay at home' order and before businesses started to slowly reopen with new restrictions, parks and trails experienced a drastic increase in usage. People sought outdoor recreational opportunities as a way to get out of the house and the reduced hours spent working meant there was more time to spend on leisure activities. Some facilities that were able to open include the Cascades Golf Course and the Griffy Lake Boathouse. Signs were placed around all city properties to remind people to wear face masks, practice good hygiene, and respect six-foot distance of others.

COVID-19 continues to be an ongoing public health threat so the City of Bloomington will continue to promote and enforce safety precautions that help reduce the transmission of the virus.

### **Interpretive Trail Applications**

ERAC members were given updates on two new interpretive trail applications Parks staff are working on. In May, the Department hired a company called OuterSpatial to create a trail map application for mobile phones using city GIS data. This app allows park users to easily locate trails and points of interest for each city park. The public can also utilize self-guided hikes made available on the app to learn more about their local environment. In April, Parks staff began a partnership with Image Matters to develop

an interpretative trail application that would be made available to the public on a website. This application would be accessible to park users who have access to the internet or mobile data plan and would offer various tours throughout the city, including a popular haunted cemetery tour and bird box tour along Clear Creek Trail. ERAC members were asked to participate in the soft launch of both applications to provide feedback and make suggestions for additional tour ideas.

### **Native Plant and Tree Installations**

Parks staff gave regular updates on the installation and management of trees and native plantings in our parks. Planting trees and plugs have been the major focus of the city's restoration efforts along public trails as well as including both in the design plans of Switchyard Park (SYP). ERAC members were presented a field guide and maintenance plan for SYP as well as given updates on tree planting projects at Schmaltz Farm Park. Due to COVID-19 safety guideline, the city was unable to host any volunteer programs to assist with plantings and the removal of invasive. The city's Urban Forester continues to work towards annually planting 600 trees using the information gathered from Davey Resource Group in 2019 with a preference towards native species.

### **Griffy Master Plan**

The original 1984 Master Plan was updated in 2008. Parks staff has decided to update the plan by sections. This year, Parks hired Western EcoSystems Technology, Inc. (WEST) to complete a bird, reptile, and amphibian inventory of Griffy Lake Nature Preserve. The information gathered from this study will be used to update the Griffy Master Plan and ensure the appropriate management of this property. ERAC members were kept updated on the progress of this study. WEST staff will continue to inventory the bird, reptile, and amphibian species until December 2021. Vegetation is also continuing to be monitored by Eco Logic botanists to inform decisions regarding deer management in the future. Flora and Fauna inventory results will be reviewed by ERAC members.

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

Deer management, once again was a regular discussion topic at meetings. In 2020, Bloomington Parks and Recreation (BPR) applied for and received a \$25,000 grant from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) to cover a portion of the cost for the Community Hunting Access Program (CHAP) at Griffy Lake Nature Preserve. Funds were used to hire a CHAP coordinator to plan and facilitate the hunt during the last three weekends of November during deer season. The City hired White Buffalo, who was previously hired to do the sharpshooting in 2017 that removed 62 deer and coordinate the 2019 CHAP program that removed 26 deer from the park. Research and plant inventories continue to show that deer management is required to allow native plants to recover. The Griffy ecosystem is unstable and unable to support the current level of deer browse pressure.

Over 50 CHAP participants hunted in the Park during the last three weekends of November. All hunters were required to pass a proficiently test and be properly licensed to hunt deer with firearms at Griffy Lake. Deer reduction zone status was requested from the DNR and approved, however the announcement of this coincided with news regarding the start of the archery season. This has created some confusion among hunters who are under the impression that they may go to Griffy to hunt using archery equipment – the only hunting allowed at Griffy is during the CHAP hunt. For safety reasons, hunters were only permitted to fire downward from tree stands. BPR coordinated with Indiana

University to allow for hunter access on their property near Griffy Lake. A private security firm was hired by the BPR to patrol the access points to Griffy Lake Nature 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 trail heads to inform the public of the closure of the property during the weekends of the hunt.

In total, 40 deer were removed from the park over the three weekends. Based on the results from the Deer Browse Survey conducted by Eco Logic, the deer browse pressure is still high and management efforts will continue until vegetation populations show signs of recovery. ERAC members support continued deer management at Griffy Lake.

### **Griffy Lake Loop Trail / Griffy Accessible Fishing Pier**

The proposed Griffy Lake Loop Trail has been routed and has been bundled with the Griffy Accessible Fishing Pier project. Staff provided an updated design of the Griffy Accessible Fishing Pier from Mader Design LLC. ERAC members viewed the designs which include a raised crosswalk, realignment of the park entrance, and a semi-circle shaped shoreline access feature with fishing pier sections extending into the Lake. The structure and the surrounding boardwalk designs will help connect the north and south shore segments of the Griffy Lake Loop Trail. ERAC members reviewed the Griffy Lake Loop Trail route and provided feedback. The proposed route is almost 6 miles long miles of soft surface trail and will include bridges and stairs to cross ravines. The proposed trail route uses mostly existing trails connected by a few new trails to form a loop around the western portion of Griffy Lake. Important connector sections including a trail along the top of Griffy Dam and a walkway extension along N. Headley Rd. required Regional General Permit approval from IDNR (Permit FW-30802) and IDEM. Permits were submitted in November 2020 and staff continue to work with contractors to satisfy project requirements. Additionally, since the construction plans require filling a portion of the lake, wetland mitigation credits will be purchased to offset the project's impact. Staff continues to update members of the advisory council on design plans and welcomes feedback for the project. Funding for the accessible fishing pier on the west side of the causeway has been secured. A Headley road pedestrian crossing will connect the parking area to the Pier and Loop Trail. Trees & Trails Bicentennial Bond funding has been obtained for the design and development of the project.

### **Trail Updates**

Throughout the year, ERAC members were updated by BPR staff on trail development projects. While the Griffy Lake Loop Trail received the most attention, other projects such as the RCA Trail improvements, the Lower Cascades Park Trail development, and continued invasive plant management along the Rail Trail were discussed. The city decided to close a portion of Old SR 37 through Lower Cascades Park, starting near the Sycamore Shelter and extending south to just before the IMI entrance. This pilot project is on-going to accommodate increased trail usage and make the road safer for park users. Trail connections and development will continue to be discussed with ERAC members as BPR works on bond projects where trails are a central focus.

## **Outreach**

ERAC members were regularly updated on the outreach activities of the department such as Roving Naturalist, Nature Days, Adopt-A-Stream/Acre/Trail, and after-school programs. Due to COVID-19, many in-person programs and large events had to be cancelled, such as Bug Fest and Sustaining Nature and Your Land (SNAYL) Day. Instead, efforts were switched towards producing virtual programs to share on the City's YouTube page and social media outlets. Staff also worked on adjusting outdoor programs to accommodate new COVID-19 protocols and to allow for safe distancing. Groups sizes were limited, face masks required, and hand sanitizer used often.

Members shared their virtual outreach efforts including Sassafras Audubon Society online programs and Monroe County-Identify and Reduce Invasive Species (MC-IRIS) workshops. Parks staff continued to improve the GIS data and descriptions for all parks presented on OuterSpatial's mobile application. Staff also continued to develop interpretive hikes that will be made available to park users on the mobile app and on a guided tour website being developed by Image Matters. ERAC members were asked to download the app and provide feedback to staff on the usage and content.

Moving in 2021, COVID-19 continues to be an ongoing public health threat so future outreach efforts will have to conform to the guidelines given by the CDC and ISDH.