



2021 Environmental Resources Advisory Council Annual Report

2021 Initiatives and Topics of Interest

- COVID-19 Impacts
- Long-term Restoration Projects
- Cascades Park Trail & Stream Stabilization Project
- Griffy Master Plan Updates
- Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Deer Management
- Griffy Lake Loop Trail/ Griffy Accessible Fishing Pier Development

COVID-19 Impacts on Parks and Recreation

In March 2020, the State Department of Health confirmed Indiana's first case of coronavirus (COVID-19). A year later, COVID-19 safety precautions were still in place by the direction of the Monroe County Health Department (MCHD). While some State restrictions were rescinded, indoor face masks requirements, physical distancing, and contact tracing procedures were still enforced in Monroe County to reduce transmission. Additionally, Governor Holcomb declared that all public meetings be held virtually to discourage indoor group gatherings. For this reason, all ERAC meetings in 2021 were held on Zoom.

Fortunately, Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department (BPRD) facilities such as both public pools and the Twin Lakes Recreation Center were able to welcome visitors again, community events were able to happen as planned, and several improvement projects were able to begin.

COVID-19 and related variants have persisted to impact the public health in this County, so BPRD will continue to promote and enforce safety precautions that help reduce the transmission.

Long-term Restoration Projects

Throughout the year, ERAC members were given updates on several long-term restoration projects that take place on BPRD property. These projects include new tree plantings and replacements, invasive plant management along public trails and riparian corridors, native plant installations in urban greenspaces, as well as low-mow practices in park spaces to minimize fuel use and increase habitat for wildlife. These projects support a variety of the City's current Sustainability Action Plan (SAP) and Climate Action Plan (CAP) goals.

Additionally, members reviewed plans for a prescribed burn at Griffy Lake Nature Preserve and provided feedback on the Integrated Pest Management Plan (IPM). Parks staff also 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 suggestions for additional restoration projects.

Cascades Park Trail & Stream Stabilization Project

Preparation for the Cascades Park Trail and Stream Stabilization Project began early in the year. ERAC members provided feedback on the project scope, which included stabilizing the streambank to reduce erosion, constructing an accessible boardwalk to the Cascades waterfall, and extending the Cascades Park Trail (Phase 5 of the project). Members also weighed in on the removal of several trees along the west side of the creek. These trees were removed to allow for the creek banks to be reshaped to improve the stream conditions. A tree replanting ratio of 5 to 1 will occur in the same watershed to offset these removals once construction is complete.

Additionally, ERAC members were asked to comment on the pilot road closure. Since March 2020, Old State Road 37 through Lower Cascades Park had been converted to a bicycle- and pedestrian-only trail. Considering a lot of public input, the road through Lower Cascades was reopened for motorists with several speed bumps added.

The Cascades Park Trail (Phase 5) and Stream Stabilization Project is on track to be completed in 2022.

Griffy Master Plan

The original 1984 Griffy Master Plan was updated in 2008. Since then, Parks staff have decided to update the plan annually by sections. In 2020, 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. In December 2021, WEST shared the Reptile, Amphibian, and Avian Inventory Surveys at Griffy Lake Nature Preserve with Parks staff. ERAC members will review this report at the February 2022 meeting.

Aquatic vegetation management in Griffy Lake continues to be supported by the Lake and River Enhancement (LARE) grant provided by Indiana Department of Nature Resources (IDNR). Using LARE grant funds, Parks staff hired Aquatic Control to conduct vegetation surveys, control invasive species, and update the Griffy Lake Aquatic Vegetation Management Plan. As part of the LARE program requirements, the results from this restoration project are presented to the City of Bloomington Board of Park Commissioners as well as shared with ERAC members.

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.

Griffy Lake Nature Preserve Deer Management

Deer management, once again was a regular discussion topic at meetings. In 2021, BPRD applied for and received a grant from 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. BPRD hired White Buffalo,

who was previously hired to do the sharpshooting in 2017 that removed 62 deer, coordinated the 2019 CHAP program that removed 26 deer from the park, and coordinated the 2020 CHAP program that removed 40 deer from the park.

With the help of the CHAP coordinator, all 43 participants were required to pass a proficiently test and be properly licensed to hunt deer with firearms on the property. Deer Reduction Zone status was requested from the IDNR 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. A private security firm was hired by the BPRD 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, 47 deer were removed from the park over the three weekends. Research and plant inventories conducted by Eco Logic, LLC. continue to show that deer management is required to allow native plants to recover. Specifically, Parks staff aims to reduce browse pressure on young oak and hickory saplings so that they can mature enough to support wildlife in the park. 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 CHAP results along with the vegetation study data.

Griffy Lake Loop Trail / Griffy Accessible Fishing Pier

Trees & Trails Bicentennial Bond funding has been obtained for the design and development of this project. In 2020, Parks staff presented the proposed Griffy Lake Loop Trail route to ERAC members as well as the plans for several trail connections and an accessible fishing pier. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 impacts on labor and material costs, the project scope was shifted based on the construction budget and split into phases. The first phase includes 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. Parks staff provided an updated design to ERAC members as well as invited a representative from Mader Design LLC. to attend an ERAC meeting and answer any questions.

In August 2021, Griffy Lake was lowered to allow contractors to examine the shoreline conditions before going to bid on the project. In September 2021, Parks staff solicited bids for phase one of this project. Bids still came in over budget, so construction materials had to be adjusted. For example, limestone blocks were originally proposed for the retention wall, but Redi-Rock Kingstone will be used instead. BPRD awarded the bid to the sole bidder, E&B Paving, Inc. Construction was permitted to begin in December 2021 and last until July 2022. Site prep included removing trees along the western shoreline as well as converting the causeway to a single-lane one way (northbound) road. Park users are still able to access the main parking lot and hiking trails at Griffy Lake Nature Preserve.

Parks staff continue to update ERAC members on design plans, permit requirements, and construction progress for this project.

Trail Updates

Throughout the year, ERAC members were updated by Parks staff on trail development projects. While the Griffy Lake Loop Trail and the Cascades Park Trail received the most attention, other projects such as the Wapehani connector trail construction, the Mill Property donation, boot brush stations, and various invasive plant management efforts along other City trails were discussed. The Wapehani connector trail has been routed and construction is almost complete. This natural-surface trail segment will connect the Green Loop and Blue Loop trail routes on the eastern side of Wapehani Mountain Bike Park. The Mill Property donation includes the trail section east of Weimer road, close to the proposed east-west trail from Switchyard Park to Wapehani. This section, approximately 900 feet long and paved, will be used as part of the Clear Creek Trail extension. There is potential for additional connections to the proposed Powerline Trail and RCA Park. These projects support goals outlined in both the City's SAP and CAP which aim to connect existing greenspaces and provide additional access to residents.

Trail connections and development will continue to be discussed bi-monthly with ERAC members.

Outreach

Every meeting, ERAC members were updated on BPRD's education and outreach activities such as the Roving Naturalist, Nature Days, Weed Wrangles, Adopt-A-Stream/Acre/Trail, and After-school Nature Club programs. BPRD had to adjust outdoor programs and events to accommodate active COVID-19 protocols. Group sizes were limited, face masks required, and hand sanitizer used often. Since in-person gathering restrictions were lifted, many large community events were able to resume, such as Bug Fest, BirdFest, and Get Outdoors Day. BPRD partners with several outside agencies to coordinate these events.

Additionally, BPRD continued its partnership with Monroe County-Identify and Reduce Invasive Species (MC-IRIS) to host a monthly First Saturday Weed Wrangle program and educate the community on invasive plant management. In 2021, this program was expanded to allow for weekly Weed Wrangles at specific parks based on community engagement.

Lastly, Parks staff continue to improve the GIS data and descriptions for all parks presented on OuterSpatial's mobile application. Parks staff will continue to develop interpretive hikes that will be made available to park users on the free mobile app. ERAC members were asked to download the app and provide feedback on the usage and content.

Moving forward in 2022, 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 MCHD.