

Sawtooth Bluff Visioning and Master Plan
Steering Committee Meeting #1
October 6, 2017 @ 1:00 – 3:00 p.m. – Cook County Courthouse

Attendees

Sue Abrahamson	Lisa Kerr	David Demmer	Myron Bursheim
Mike Roth	Andy Hubley	Barb Caskey	

Summary

The meeting began at 1:00 at the Cook County Courthouse. Barb Caskey, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, welcomed everyone in attendance and asked attendees to introduce themselves.

Planning Process Overview

This was the first meeting of the Steering Committee for the Sawtooth Bluff Visioning and Master Plan process. The intent of this process is to gather input from multiple stakeholders to identify possible development opportunities and amenities for the Sawtooth Bluff site, resulting in the creation of a vision and master plan for site development. Coastal Program STAR grant funding was sought and awarded earlier in 2017, with a project timeline of September 1, 2017 – February 28, 2018. Cook County and the City of Grand Marais both provided matching funds for the planning process. The results of this process are intended to strengthen future applications for regional designation by the Greater Minnesota Regional Parks and Trails Commission and increase the likelihood of receiving State Legacy funds for park and trail development.

Background Information

Participants shared information regarding the history and previous discussions and planning processes regarding the use of this site. In 2000, a subcommittee to explore options for this site was convened as part of an EDA-led development initiative. Through facilitated discussions, the subcommittee created a “consensus document” which was provided to the Steering Committee for review and consideration (attached). The field notes from the consensus agreement were utilized in the initial application to designate this area as a Natural Resource-Based Regional Park, citing the patterned fen, diverse habitat, native plant communities and wetlands, and the existence of a spring which at one time was used to provide City drinking water. None of the options identified in the 2000 planning process have been undertaken yet. There is some desire to ensure that any development of this area preserves the natural resources, is focused and not intense.

Current Use

Participants were asked about current use of the site and any current structures or amenities. The following were noted:

- Snowmobile route at the top of the property;
- Superior Hiking Trail (SHT) skirts the boundary of this site;
- 3 towers exist on city property with all possible options on the towers;
- Ski hill was previously operated in the 50’s and 60’s; this land is now owned by the City.

Community Needs

The County and the City have both identified housing (all types) as a well-documented, high priority need. Residential development was identified as a potential use for the site if the land is deemed buildable. The importance of determining whether any part of this site would be appropriate for housing development was a

recurring topic of discussion throughout the meeting. Identified barriers to housing development on this site include wetlands, steep slopes, zoning, solid rock/cliff terrain, and no water/sewer (cost prohibitive to extend). However, it was also noted that housing development would contribute to the tax base and add needed housing capacity. Concern was expressed that the costs to definitively determine buildable areas would be burdensome and would likely only confirm areas that are already considered not feasible for residential development. The housing study conducted in conjunction with the Nordic Star development (affordable housing through One Roof Housing) identified 52 potential building sites within the county. The results of this study will be revisited and reviewed at the next meeting to resolve the issue of potential residential development on this site. Zoning information from the County and City can also be used to clarify potentially buildable areas.

Potential Uses

The Steering Committee expressed a desire to consider multiple purpose trails and amenities, with the goal of developing a city/county-owned park of regional significance that could be used by multiple groups with minimal conflict.

Potential uses for the site identified included:

- Expanded educational opportunities in partnership with ISD 166, including an environmental learning center;
- Paved bike trail (connected to ISD resources), school/cycling association parking and bike skills circuit;
- Event center in the lower part;
- Fenced dog park south of paved road;
- ADA-compliant hard surface trail along the bottom contours;
- Machine-built mountain bike/hiking/fat-bike trails with switch back;
- SHT spur with parking;
- Re-acquire and incorporate the former zip line property;
- Interpretive walk (fen) in partnerships with Forest Service;
- Trail head for multiple users;
- Multi-use trails, machine-built trails (multi-use by season). Barriers identified during discussion include cost of development and differences in grooming by use in the winter;
- The original SHT was near the fen on the ridge; potential to move the SHT to the ridge and not co-locate.
- Snowmobile trailhead –many snowmobilers prefer to ride to/from lodging and a trail head below the bluff would be less than ideal. Many park and ride from the old airport. Lack of snow continues to be an issue.
- ATV trails – potential for ATV Terrain Park, certification classes. Cook County is currently favorable to ATV users who use logging roads. ATV riders may prefer connectivity to other trails, which would be difficult on this site. Border to border efforts are still underway but progress is slow.
- Campsites: Existing city campground along the waterfront fills up regularly. The potential to move the entire campground to this site to free up land at existing campground was discussed. This option would not be possible due to conservation easements. However, it would be feasible to construct rustic camping sites (not RV sites) on this site. A campground might attract bike campers. Explore potential to link existing campground to new campsites
- 4-season Yurts (growing appeal of fat bike yurt-to-yurt opportunities)
- Potential use by equine groups was mentioned, as this group has expressed an interest in having access to trails. The needs of this group are less defined at the moment (uncertainty about the length of their desired ride, interest in camping or destination travel, need for parking). Concerns have been voiced by the forest service about spread of invasive species by horses through feed/waste.

Access at the top of the property was identified as a potential area of concern. Current residents on the existing county road, which is an older, narrow, dead-end road with no gate, would prefer it not be used as public access for the upper part of this site. However, as a public property with potential regional significance, it does not make sense to not provide access to the entire parcel.

Stakeholder/Public Input

The Steering Committee discussed how stakeholder/public input would be sought and what criteria would be used to select priority elements and appropriate locations for inclusion in the master plan. Key stakeholders identified included the City, the County, ISD 166, hiking associations, members of the original consensus committee, bike, ATV and snowmobile proponents, and property owners adjacent to the Sawtooth Bluff area. An interactive map where stakeholders could offer input was suggested as a hybrid approach between a public meeting and an online comment format.

Next Meeting

The Steering Committee determined that a follow up meeting will be held prior to seeking stakeholder or public input, a slight deviation from the initial project timeline.

The next Steering Committee meeting will be held on **Monday, October 23 from 12:00 - 2:00 p.m. at City Hall.** Lunch will be provided.

Topics for this meeting will include, reviewing existing information to determine the feasibility of residential development within the area being considered, finalizing the Steering Committee's vision for this site, determining the criteria for proposed amenities/development, and finalizing the messaging and format for seeking stakeholder feedback.

Time limitations precluded development of a draft vision statement at this meeting. However, based upon the discussion, the following draft statement will be proposed and discussed at the next meeting:

Sawtooth Bluff should be developed as a County/City-owned park of regional significance providing multi-use amenities and trails for local residents and destination travelers while preserving the diverse natural resources present on this site.