

Sawtooth Bluff Visioning and Master Plan
Steering Committee Meeting #6
February 20, 2018 @ 11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. – Join Me Meeting (online/phone)

Attendees

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

Summary

The meeting began at 11:00 with participants joining by phone and viewing maps and documents through the Join Me link, as road conditions precluded travel to Grand Marais. Barb Caskey, Arrowhead Regional Development Commission, welcomed everyone in attendance.

Review Project Timeline

Funding through the Coastal Program grant ends on February 28, 2018 (reports due March 15, 2018). The deliverables for this project included development of a draft plan, which has been developed and will be reviewed today. However, the Phase II public input process has not yet been completed. Matching funds provided by the County and City will be used to support the final public input process and finalization of the plan. There is no deadline for submitting the plan to the GMRPTC for designation as a park of regional significance; the July 31 deadline is for projects eligible to seek funding.

Master Plan Review

The group reviewed the draft master plan as presented (2.19.2018 draft), with edits made to the draft on screen during the meeting, including identification of Phase I priorities. Each section of the GMRPTC portal requirements were reviewed and addressed, with the intent to develop a “hybrid” plan for public review – one that meets the requirements of the GMRPTC portal but is constructed in a manner that is conducive to public review and comment. While the text of the plan was amended during the meeting, the maps will be edited and the updated plan will be sent to the Steering Committee for additional review prior to the next meeting.

Communication and Phase II Public Input

To facilitate additional public input, the draft Master Plan will be ready to present to the Parks and Trails Commission at their next meeting, scheduled for March 26th. These meetings are open to the public, so the public will be invited to attend the meeting, review the plan and offer comment and feedback. This will be the sole purpose of this meeting. Lisa will communicate with the Parks and Trails Committee regarding the March 26th meeting. Barb will work with Lisa on drafting and distributing a press release regarding the Phase II public input session and enlisting support to publicize it via social media.

To assist with communication about the Master Plan and the upcoming public input session, Andy will draft talking points and distribute them for review to the Steering Committee (see attached).

Next Steps

The next meeting will be held by conference call/join.me on March 5, 2018 from 10:30 – 12:00 p.m. The next draft of the plan will be provided to the committee for review at that time.

Talking points

Property is 640 acres that is under local control. 92% of Cook County is publicly owned, nearly all of it under state and federal control, primarily USFS. USFS isn't increasing sites and services to recreation facilities, might be decreasing services. Therefore this property takes on even more importance. Cook County and Grand Marais decided to hold a visioning process to look at options for the site. They applied for and received a Coastal Program grant to pay for ½ the cost of a facilitated visioning and planning process. The County and City split the remaining costs. The Arrowhead Regional Development Commission was hired to facilitate the process. A committee was formed to guide the process that included County staff and officials, City staff and officials, a resident that neighbors the property, and interested citizens.

Through the visioning process, Cook County and Grand Marais are working to determine a vision for the property that brings the best value to residents and visitors. A survey was held asking stakeholders what they may want to see on the property. Responses varied from "do nothing" to disc golf courses, mountain bike trails, a major trailhead facility, and dog parks among others. After reviewing the survey results, the committee examined some options:

- Medium and/or high-density housing. Could apartments, quad homes, twin homes, single homes be constructed on the site? Workforce housing is consistently identified as a need in the County. In examining that option, the Committee felt that this type of housing was only viable in areas very close to existing utilities that were relatively flat. The half-moon shaped parcel on the east side of the Gunflint Trail could fit that description, as could a small portion of the site north of the hospital. This type of development was not popular with survey respondents, but limiting it to two small areas may be publicly acceptable.
- Market rate/low-density housing. Selling the property to developers or individuals was discussed. This was determined to not be an option for the site. Limited buildable sites would likely result in a very low-density pattern of development with much land disturbance for roads and utilities accessing homes. The potential high cost for utilities and the lack of support from the public steered the committee away from this idea. However, if no other uses can be identified, selling the property to private parties could still increase the County and City's tax base.
- Do nothing. The property has existed for many years as it is today. There are some unofficial trails on the site. There are some wetlands on or near the site. Plants of environmental significance may be on the site. The committee acknowledges that do nothing is an option, but chose to explore ways to have the property bring some community value while limiting impacts.
- Regional, High Quality, Destination Park. The committee feels that if a premier park facility is built on the site, the property could have a positive impact on the community. It would contribute to the tourism economy, give residents more options for being active and healthy, and fulfill some stated needs in the area. The park could include some or all of the following uses.
 - Community Trail Head. The Cook County Comprehensive Trails Plan recommended a multi-use trail head near Grand Marais. This site, due to its proximity to the community and its ownership status was examined as an option as trail head by the committee. The committee is recommending the site to be a trail head. The trail head should have direct trail access, parking, and information kiosks. It also could include picnic facilities and a building with restrooms, changing areas, and bike repair stations. If feasible and acceptable, the site could include a concessionaire business (food, repairs, vending, etc.). If a trailhead includes a building, the committee recommends that building be compact, efficiently and limited to 1 story (so as to minimize viewshed impacts. Trails accessing the site would include mountain bike trails, a

- gravel biking trail, disc golf course, a paved trail leading into Grand Marais, hiking trails, and winter biking trails.
- Campground. There is a shortage of campsites on the entire North Shore in the summer months. The Committee, with advice from Grand Marais officials, determined that a small campground for small to medium sized RV and trailers would be in demand and could bring funding to the site through camping fees. The committee is recommending a campground be built on the site. A trailhead building could also serve as a check-in and service center for the campground. Additionally, bike to and hike to campsites could be developed and dispersed through the site.
 - Mountain Bike Trails. The committee envisions 10-20 miles of new, single track, purpose built mountain bike trails. Mountain biking is a growing sport that is popular with visitors and residents. Mountain bike trails are often primarily maintained by users as part of bike clubs. To draw national and even international mountain bike tourists, over 50 miles of trails are recommended. Between Cook County's existing and soon-to-be-built mountain bike trails near Grand Marais and Tofte, plus Lake County's soon-to-be-built trails near Split Rock, the North Shore can approach that number. Additional miles in the Sawtooth Bluff property, with a trail connection over to Pincushion, could make Grand Marais itself a mountain bike center point. The trail head facility would support those trails.
 - Hiking Trails. Currently, the Superior Hiking Trail moves adjacent to the site and uses the North Shore State Trail (snowmobile) north of Sawtooth Bluff. The Committee would like to see the Superior Hiking Trail move through the property, connecting to the trailhead and offer unobtrusive overlooks of Grand Marais. Dispersed campsites could be a part of the new trail corridor. Another hiking trail idea is to have a trail that accesses views of the unique "patterned fen" on the north side of the Sawtooth Bluff property. Any trail built in that area would have to move around wetlands or have a boardwalk that is engineered to protect wetlands.
 - Gravel trail. A smooth gravel trail could be considered for the site. This trail would be promoted for use by those folks with less mobility, such as older people, families with young children. Walking, running, and biking would be allowed. Bike-to campsites set back from the trail could be considered.
 - Disc Golf. The survey showed a significant desire for a disc golf course on the site. This growing sport is fairly unobtrusive, calling for small forest clearings and basket installations. This course could be located close to the trail head. Disc rentals could be offered.
 - Dog Park. This was also a popular response to the survey. It would feature a semi-cleared, fenced area. It should be fairly close to the trailhead or a roadway so that garbage cans with dog waste can be easily accessed.
 - Rock Climbing. There is an area of steep rocks in the site. Rock climbing could be an attraction here. A concessionaire could be used to manage the site, ensuring safety and limiting damages to rock faces. The trail head should be fairly close to this area so that climbing equipment can be carried to the site.

Note that within this idea is a value of preservation. The park's facilities should avoid environmental, viewshed, and other impacts while still making the site a true destination.

Based on the available information, input, and discussion the committee formed this vision statement for the property:

Vision

Sawtooth Bluff should be developed as a County/City-owned park of regional significance offering multi-use amenities and trails to:

- provide healthy, active lifestyle opportunities for local residents;
- spur economic growth by attracting destination travelers; and
- preserve the diverse natural resources present on this site.

Guiding Principles

All proposed amenities or developments must be consistent with the guiding principles

- As a park intended to be regionally significant, a package of amenities will be developed to draw people to the region, using the environmental features as a draw.
- The design of amenities will have a minimal impact on the natural environment of the area.
- Nothing will be built or developed without a maintenance plan in place.
- There is value in adding infrastructure with a defined revenue stream (campsites, as an example).
- Development should be designed to limit view shed impact while still offering stunning views to park users
- The intent of developing the park is to provide space and infrastructure for user groups
- The emphasis should be on recreational development
- Planned, limited, low-profile development on this site supporting recreation for residents and tourists may offer greater protection from unpopular development options than doing nothing.
- This site is large enough to accommodate multiple user groups while still leaving large areas of the designated park area undeveloped to preserve environmental assets (fen, wetlands, unobstructed views).

Next steps for this process are to:

- complete a draft plan prior to March 15th to meet Coastal Program requirements
- develop and send a press release giving the public instructions on how to review the draft plan and make comments on it
- Hold a public input session on March 26th
- Make any changes and finalize the plan to send to the Greater Minnesota Parks and Trails Commission
- Seek implementation funding