

Memo: **Lawrence Park**

April 12, 2021

To: Fred Bicha and Kalispell City Parks Department

Fr: Flathead Audubon Society members April 2, 2021 Lawrence Park Field Trip participants

Re: Lawrence Park Nature Trail Expansion

On April 2, 2021, Kalispell Parks Superintendent Fred Bicha and five members of Flathead Audubon Society toured portions of Lawrence Park to explore how to best balance the natural values of the park's woodlands and wetlands and growing recreational interest and other human pressures. Per our discussion, this memo recaps some of Flathead Audubon Society members' observations as well as main points that they would like to the City to consider as the City expands the trail system. We applaud Fred's vision and work thus far to create a meandering nature educational trail with signs and overlooks that emphasize wildlife and wetland ecosystems along with local history but we also recognize the highly sensitive nature of this intact riparian area for nesting birds, wildlife, and wetland functions. We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this field trip and assist the City in the development of this project.

- The wetlands and cottonwood bottoms of Lawrence Park represent **high value wildlife habitat for birds, mammals and amphibians including nesting waterfowl, cavity nesters, long-toes salamanders, painted turtles, and mink and river otter**. These wetlands are natural filters that keep downstream rivers and lakes clean. Riparian (waterside) habitats are naturally rare in Montana yet host the greatest variety of plants and animals of any natural community. **Kalispell is lucky to have this natural gem in its parks network and should manage it wisely with a priority for natural values.**
- We witnessed extensive weed problems, including hounds tongue, Canada thistle, Oxeye daisy, invasive rose bushes and common buckthorn, spotted knapweed, and others. Disturbed soils of this trail and other volunteer trails have created a network for new weed invasions. The city needs a **funded, integrated weed management plan** for Lawrence Park, but especially these wetlands. Flathead Audubon is addressing these same issues at the Owen Sowerwine natural area and would be happy to coordinate with the City on possible grants to address invasive species. We also want to include services of local Montana Conservation Corps in the future to manage invasive common buckthorn.
- The downed woody debris and standing dead trees may seem messy or out of place in a city park but are very important for birds and wildlife. Whenever possible **leave snags and deadfall alone**. Increasing human presence in the woods will lead to more demands for thinning the trees and culling "hazard" trees. This has already greatly reduced the forest cover elsewhere in Lawrence Park.
- Open water is important nesting habitat for a variety of birds and mammals, yet people and their dogs are also drawn to water. We **recommend building trails to have one vantage point where people can view wildlife and water, then keeping the trails well away (100 yards) from open water and incorporating vegetative barriers** along shorelines to encourage people to stay on the existing trail. Trails on soft, muddy ground near open water will be more difficult to maintain as well.
- The expanded trail network has been described by in city documents as "multiple use" while the current trail is labeled as a "nature" trail. We suggest that this **trail be classified as a nature trail**.
- Mountain bike riding and disc golf are not compatible with the enjoyment and purpose of nature trails nor protection of riparian and wetland areas. There will be a natural increase in pressure for many public uses to expand into the forest and wetlands once the loop trails are built. There is already some

evidence of erosion from bike riding on portions of the trail. **Prevention through reclassification, signage, turnstiles, and education** is more effective and easier than trying to restore social trails.

- Adequate presence and educational efforts from park staffers will help reduce off-leash dogs. Dog waste in urban parks have led to significant e-coli and other bacterial pollution in riparian areas. A **“no-waste” policy** can help avoid this issue.
- We saw extensive litter and signs of illegal camping and fires in the forest (Ben Long will forward photos). The city needs to provide **adequate regular foot patrols in these woods to keep these illegal activities in check**. While the trail system may have benefits for litter control and access, it may inadvertently push illegal drug use and camping deeper into forest where it can cause further environmental impacts and further increase conflicts with neighboring property owners.
- We think that volunteers from the local area, the prior Friends of Lawrence Park group, and other groups like Flathead Audubon or garden clubs can be encouraged to **walk the nature trail, observe/report on condition of the trail, pick up litter, remove hounds tongue flowers or seeds, and report any other concerns**.
- We talked about encouraging the creation of **a native plant garden** in existing garden areas if the City needed help rehabilitating one of the prior gardens. Fred mentioned there is one garden that needs rehabilitation. The Kalispell Garden Club is working on the other. We would like to work with Kalispell Parks and Recreation and Native Plant Society on a model native garden, if both organizations are interested.
- We noticed that one of the disc golf “holes” leads disc golfers to and over a wetland that was originally built as a mitigation wetland under the Clean Water Act. We recommend **moving this disc golf hole well away from the mitigation wetland so the wetland can be incorporated into the nature education and/or left undisturbed**.
- We noticed extensive erosion on the north slope near the golf course. Proper trail access up the slope will provide a path up the hill that would give walkers an alternative to walking directly uphill thus creating ruts that become erosive channels. The existing Skibsrud Trail is worth maintaining, but like all trails needs regular effort to remain passable. **Moving the trail off the steep slopes along with continued management of knapweed will improve this area for nesting birds and limit erosion**.
- The area has a **unique history** that will be interesting to users. The background of an ice-block area, junk yard, and a wetland mitigation area is particularly valuable information for users to see how areas have been and continue to be rehabilitated.
- **Species Observed:** We saw or heard a variety of woodpeckers including Downy, Pileated, Hairy, and Common Flicker; also, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadees; Mallard pairs in tiny wet areas near possible nesting sites; we also flushed a Great Horned Owl and Red-tailed Hawk.