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Kalispell City Council citycouncil@kalispell.com
Doug Russell citymanager@kalispell.com
P.O. Box 1997
Kalispell, MT 59903

Dear Members of Kalispell City Council and Mr. Russell,

Flathead Audubon Society, with over 400 members in northwest Montana, has become aware of the city's efforts to manage littering, vagrancy and illegal drug use and dirty needles in Lawrence Park. Flathead Audubon Society, in cooperation with the city, has been leading birding outings at Lawrence Park for more than 30 years. We appreciate the city's attention to keeping Lawrence Park safe and clean as that is good for both people and wildlife habitat.

Our mission is to conserve birds, wildlife habitat and ecosystem diversity; promote awareness and appreciation of the natural world through education and advocacy; work with diverse groups and agencies to achieve sound decisions on natural resource issues; provide community services such as school programs, work projects, and field trips.

One option under your consideration is vegetation management in Lawrence Park, particularly in the 55 acres of unique habitats along the Stillwater River and associated wetlands. Recently, the city completed extensive forest thinning at Woodland Park. We write this letter to highlight the special values of Lawrence Park as the city addresses this same issue for Lawrence Park.

Lawrence Park Natural Values

Many members of our board and organization were part of the original "Friends of Lawrence Park" and participated in the collaborative efforts to plan, develop, and protect Lawrence Park. Lawrence Park is named for Kalispell's first parks director who envisioned a natural oasis within the city. That vision has held true for nearly a century.

Over those years, the community valued not only the recreation potential, but also the values of the wetlands, floodplain, and cottonwood/steep slopes habitat in Lawrence Park. Today, Lawrence Park houses one of the best examples of riverine and associated wetland habitats that are relatively viewable and accessible in the Kalispell Area. The bird diversity and abundance in Lawrence Park is rather outstanding due to the quality and abundance of habitats; these breeding and migratory birds all depend on healthy ecosystems. The wetlands and floodplain also protect Kalispell from large flooding events and are a good example to the public of the value of these places to protecting infrastructure and maintaining high water quality. There are a variety of native (and also non-native) plants that are useful for education. Many wildlife species also travel and depend on the Stillwater River and nearby wetlands and tributaries for cover and food. This is particularly true for wide ranging species such as river otter, red fox, bobcat, moose, white-tailed deer, bald eagles, and great blue herons. Lawrence Park also provides year-round habitat for mammals such as bobcat, red fox, raccoon, muskrat, mink, and white-tailed deer; cavity nesting birds such as pileated, downy and hairy woodpeckers along with black-capped chickadees; and other small birds such as song sparrows and brown creepers.

Very few cities anywhere can boast of this kind of habitat within their boundaries. We are proud of this unique community resource as it is a significant natural piece of habitat within the city boundaries.

Considerations for vegetation management

- Given these values, any plan should keep in mind the unique nature of the healthy cottonwood galleries at Lawrence Park. These trees provide outstanding nesting habitat and are ecologically valuable as young trees, mature trees, as standing dead snags and as fallen logs. Cottonwood galleries are increasingly rare across Montana for a variety of reasons. We are lucky to have such an example in our city park. Unlike a pine forest, this is not an appropriate habitat to “park out”; given the floodplain’s wet soils, blow down is highly likely if the canopy is disturbed.
- Keep in mind the fragile nature of the wetlands and the steep, highly erosive slopes. These wetlands – and their associated shrubs such as alder and dogwood, help keep our water clean by acting as natural filters between street runoff and the Stillwater River. Heavy equipment work in the wetland area may require a federal permit.
- There are extensive weed problems already established in these wetlands, including hounds tongue, leafy spurge, thistle, oxeye daisy, and knapweed, as well as exotic vines that cover entire trees. Disturbing the ground would likely make these infestations worse. Any vegetation management plan should focus on weed control.
- Any gains in ‘clearing’ these wetland thickets and cottonwood stands will be short-term and short-lived. If mature shrubs and cottonwood trees are removed, the remaining second growth will likely grow back even more thick, providing even more hiding cover for illegal activities.

Suggestions for managing litter, drug use and vagrancy

Sadly, drug abuse and homelessness are large societal problems. There are no simple, easy answers. It seems commonsense that some of the most cost-efficient ways of preventing unsavory activities is to work with the neighbors and community organizations to find solutions and to increase the periodic presence of park officials in all corners of our parks. Through increased patrols and community awareness, we might identify problem drug abuse areas early before they become entrenched. Certainly, it would be more cost effective use of tax dollars to invest in a little time and shoe-leather than in heavy equipment needed for large-scale vegetation management and thinning that nature would quickly un-do.

Thank you for your dedication to Kalispell’s future and we are eager to be a part of the solution for the many issues impacting Kalispell’s unique and irreplaceable Lawrence Park.

Sincerely,



President,
Flathead Audubon Society