

GENESEE COUNTY PARKS & RECREATION COMMISSION MINUTES

The semi-monthly meeting of the Genesee County Parks & Recreation Commission was held on Thursday, February 14, 2008 in the Harris Auditorium, Genesee County Administration Building, 1101 Beach Street, Flint, Michigan.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

APPOINTED MEMBERS

Joe Krapohl, President
James Washington, Vice President
William Lucas, Secretary
Raynetta Speed
Ted Henry
Rose Bogardus
Mike Keeler
Bob Ranger

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Jeff Wright, Ex-Officio
David Miller, Ex-Officio

STAFF PRESENT

Amy M. McMillan, Director
Ron Walker, Deputy Director
Matt Armentrout, Maintenance Supervisor
Deborah Wilkes, Secretary
Leisa Gagne, Finance Officer
Brian Van Patten, For-Mar
Katie McGlashen, For-Mar
Bob Davis, Park Planner
Teneisha Calhoun, Seasonal Marketing Assistant

OTHERS PRESENT:

Brian Barkey, Commission Legal Counsel
Larry Stricker, Public
Elizabeth Shaw, The Flint Journal
Brad Slaughter, Michigan Natural Features Inventory

(1) CALL TO ORDER

President Krapohl called the meeting to order at 10:08 a.m.

- (2) **PRESENTATION OF DEER BROWSE STUDY** Brad Slaughter from the Michigan Natural Features Inventory, based out of Lansing, presented his study on For-Mar Nature Preserve and Arboretum, the Hogbacks in the Holloway Reservoir Area and the Genesee Recreation Area. This company assists state, federal, local government, local landowners and other entities in managing their park land and private land for bio-diversity value and for rare and declining species.

His report highlighted the natural features of these specific parks and the affects of deer browse on the areas. In 2006 the DNR estimated there are approximately 1.7 million deer in the State of Michigan, an increase of 100% over the deer population from the 1980s. This overpopulation is causing heavy browse in areas. Urban and suburban areas, like parks, are providing refuge for these animals.

In the more rural areas, like Holloway, the browse pressure is not as intense because the area is not as restricted and it is more rural and large. They have room to move around. But, if the density is high the deer eat everything they like then they switch to other species of plants. Over time they not only eliminate certain plant species, they totally alter the structure of the habitat and it can take decades or longer for these areas to recover even after the deer numbers are removed or reduced.

Mr. Slaughter looked at any alterations to the landscape and soil conditions due to deer populations in the three parks. The focus on For-Mar showed a very significant impact of deer browse. The sensitive herbs and lilies, shrubs, trees, and seedlings were all affected. There was no green vegetation below the browse line near the DeWaters building, except where there was fencing used to exclude deer. There is a difference between deer and rabbit browse and this was clearly deer damage. Rabbits clip the twigs, rather than tear the twigs, as deer tend to do. Common species that should be flourishing are stunted severely and not flowering due to the browse.

The Hogbacks, a more rural area, showed mixed results. There is significant damage in certain areas similar to the impact at For-mar. There was an area of high ecological integrity in this park north of a creek with modest impact where the damage was less concentrated. This indicates that there are preferred areas and species and more room for the deer to move about within this park. Mr. Slaughter showed pictures of sumac plants that had a distinct line below four feet, with no vegetation at all below the browse line. The western part of the park showed browse on the milkweed but they did find some flowering milkweed. The shrub and ground layer was still lush and only moderately impacted by deer browse. The forest off of Mudd Lake showed a significant difference with severe browse.

The Genesee Recreation Area, which has both urban and rural areas, showed the flood plain is characterized by light to moderate browse. The main issue is that invasive species are abundant and those species are not favored by deer. North of the Flint River you find very similar conditions of the sumac and oak saplings that are heavily browsed the same as at Holloway.

There was a healthy floodplain area where lilies are blooming and other plants are healthy which indicates the pressure isn't as severe. The floodplain tends to be thick and the deer don't like to push through dense vegetation. Many sensitive species were still hanging on here. In several areas where there are oak and sumac the affects are similar as the other two areas.

In conclusion, Mr. Slaughter stated that the forested areas showed evidence of heavy browse, especially at For-Mar. He found heavily clipped shrubs and tree saplings and reduced population of sensitive plants, as well as significant soil compaction. In the old field areas the deer browse is there, but only a few species are impacted and it would be more of an aesthetic problem, not reducing bio-diversity per se; and, it is a different management issue and more degraded habitat.

He discussed a few different ways parks in Michigan are managing deer herds. Some have used public hunts vs. sharp-shooters. Public hunters have not produced the level of reduction in the deer herd to the levels they need to be during three years of hunting in one particular park. Another example showed a more urban park and their reasoning for hunting was the deer/car collisions. One reason they chose sharpshooters is due to their location within an urban setting and sending the public into a park surrounded by homes, with their guns blazing, was not an option. Within six days the deer herd was culled by 80 deer thus reducing the herd to an acceptable number. They worked closely with the DNR and used their recommendations to the number of deer that should be left intact. Most of the hunting was done at night and from tree stands and the shooting was pointed downward. Another example was of a group called Suburban Whitetail Management in northern Virginia that sends bow hunters from their group to shoot deer.

In his report he explains several options to hunting to which he indicates are impractical or unsuccessful or unsustainable in the long run. Birth control, enclosing areas, and relocation are not seen to be a reasonable option. There are always a number of public relations issues to be considered when choosing which option to use to cull the herd. He believes there will need to be different techniques used to cull the herd in the various parks he evaluated due to the diversity of location and how the public will respond to hunting in the urban vs. rural areas. He would also suggest contacting the DNR wildlife division and consulting with them regarding our procedures to manage the deer herd in our parks.

(3) OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PUBLIC TO ADDRESS THE COMMISSION

Larry Stricker of 3547 N Gale Rd., Davison stated that the deer herd is growing and danger of deer/car collisions is increasing.

(4) **CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS**

Discussion: There were no items removed from the consent agenda.

Motion to approve the items on the consent agenda.

Action Taken: Motion by Commission Lucas
Support by Commissioner Henry

Roll Call: Yeas: Ranger, Speed, Washington, Bogardus, Henry, Keeler, Krapohl, Lucas
Nays: None

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY 8-0

(5) **REPORT FROM LEGAL COUNSEL**

We had an appeal pending before the State Court of Appeals regarding the Oregon Township Fire Run fees. We have been in litigation with Oregon Township regarding the validity and legality of those fees and we lost the litigation in Lapeer County Circuit Court and we asked the Michigan Court of Appeals to review that ruling and we gave them the reasons they should review the issue. We learned on January 21 that they declined to review the case.

Another appeal is possible, but as a practical matter this case involves approximately \$4,000 in fees plus a precedent that will affect the imposition of fire run fees, not only to the parks, but to everybody in Oregon Township. So it may be significant, but the dollar amount and controversy here is not significant. Mr. Barkey stated that in his opinion this is the appeal that decides the case. We were unsuccessful in the court of appeals. Mr. Barkey has advised the Director to pay the fire run fees, plus the interest that has accrued on these judgments and she has done so.

(6) **DIRECTOR'S REPORT**

Ms. McMillan updated the commissioners on research that Michigan State University is doing in the county parks regarding the Emerald Ash Borer problem. There is a letter in your packet that indicates they are encouraged regarding treatment and prevention of the EAB. We will be following up with a presentation in March. This is the first good news we have had on the EAB in the three years the EAB has been on the scene. The good news is there may be an effective form of treatment. The science on this issue is still a bit soft though.

Commissioner Bogardus asked if the spray on the trunks of the trees is effective and if it is feasible to spray more trees. Ms McMillan said they will need more than one year's worth of data to see if it is effective. Mr. Cappellet is scheduled for our March meeting he will be able to explain what is going on in studies around the state and around the Midwest and parts of Canada.

(7) OTHER BUSINESS

President Krapohl stated that all the commissioners should have received an invitation to the State of the County address to be held here in the Harris Auditorium, tonight at 5:15 p.m.

President Krapohl told the commissioners that the Wildlife Management Sub-Committee met on January 9, 2008 and you have received a copy of the minutes to that meeting. Out of the sub-committee meeting came a recommendation that the full commission accept the report by the Michigan Natural Features Inventory and direct staff to develop a wildlife management plan, which should include public information and educational opportunities with public input. The Staff will be working with the committee in presenting several options and several costs that are associated with wildlife management. Ms McMillan stated that the staff will collect information on effective wildlife management programs throughout the State of Michigan. Those do concentrate on some form of harvesting deer. We will compare the deer count from this year's flyover to numbers from last year. We will look at trends and make recommendations for the different areas. All recommendations will have some form of cost associated with them, whether it is the cost to replace plants and doing nothing, or cost of managing a controlled hunt of some sort. We will be putting that cost information together to make recommendations. At this time we are limiting our scope to a controlled hunt rather than an open hunt. We are looking to keep it

revenue neutral, so that it doesn't cost more than it benefits the commission. Mr. Keeler asked if we know what the optimal deer count is? Ms. McMillan stated that the DNR and Natural Resources Inventory recommend a certain number of deer per square mile and we have done flyovers (January 16, 2008) to compare to those recommended numbers.

Commissioner Bogardus stated that there is some urgency to this issue, especially at For-Mar because if the area is that small, and it is that damaged, we need to look at something being done soon. We also need to worry about Bovine Tuberculosis. It is very real and we need to begin a public education program so the public doesn't think they are doing the deer a favor by providing piles of food for the deer. We have elk, deer and agriculture to be concerned about. We must be willing to act on this situation and let the public know what the real situation is about.

Commissioner Ranger also confirmed that data shows that Bovine TB is closer to our area and we need to act soon. It is more natural to reduce the herd by hunting than to build artificial enclosures in areas that are supposed to be left "natural". Because there is nothing in For-Mar that naturally takes care of reducing the deer population we must do it.

Ms. McMillan further stated that our responsibility is for the County Parks. We have no authority outside of County park land. We get calls with strong opinions on both sides of the issue. We have no influence on what people do for the deer, such as feeding in their yards, or how to stop deer/car collisions. Our charge is the bio-diversity of the parks and what happens beyond our borders is beyond the scope of our influence but what happens within our borders is certainly our responsibility.

President Krapohl stated that although it seems to have taken a while to get to this point, it takes a while to gather the information and do the research. His personal opinion is that now that we have the information we would be able to move forward quite rapidly and he too has read the reports of Bovine TB and it is too close for comfort and we have a lot of dairy herds and cattle farmers in the area that we should be concerned about. We will be scheduling another sub-committee meeting in the very near future to take this information forward.

Motion of support to accept the recommendation of the Wildlife Management Sub-Committee.

Action Taken: Motion by Commissioner Bogardus
Support by Commissioner Henry

No Roll Call: All yeas

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY 8-0

(8) OPPORTUNITY FOR COMMISSIONERS TO ADDRESS THE COMMISSION

Commissioner Henry expressed his appreciation for the off-site meeting. Commissioner Bogardus also stated that the staff plowed, food was fine, and thanked the Parks for the amenities at the Mill Street Warehouse for the County Board of Commissioners off-site meeting on February 13, 2008.

(9) OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PUBLIC TO ADDRESS THE COMMISSION

Mr. Sticker again recommended a managed hunt in impacted areas only. Limit costs, give the meat to the Genesee County Food Bank, and use photo ops of our people putting the meat in the Food Bank.

(10) President Krapohl adjourned the meeting at 10:59 am