

Park Notes

A newsletter of the Friends of St. Paul and Ramsey County Parks
1621 Beechwood Avenue, St. Paul, Minnesota 55116 651- 698-4543
Volume 17, Number 1 www.friendsoftheparks.org February 2002

Environmental gem in developers sights

You have been driving by the site for years. If you don't live nearby or are younger than 60, you may not know just what that big open space with the National Guard trucks is near Highway 96 and Lexington Avenue. It is a living remnant of the "hot" war of the 1940's and the cold war that followed, the Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant (TCAAP). It was built in 1941 on four square miles of farmland as a self-contained community to support the nation's defense. Owned by the Army and operated by a private contractor, ordinance for the US Armed Services and its allies were produced on site until the 1970's.

Production standards over the years were not always environmentally sensitive. Left behind are contaminated soil and ground water from disposal sites, transmission lines, and production spills. Contaminants consist of solvents used to clean ammunition metal parts, heavy metals from rifle ammunition and artillery shells, PCBs used in electrical transformers and cooling oils. So severe was the impact that the US Environmental Protection Agency gave TCAAP #1 priority for Superfund cleanup. Cleanup is ongoing.

The Friends and environmental groups have had their eye on the site for years, partly because Rice Creek flows through the area and partly because it is the largest undeveloped natural area left in Ramsey County. In 1989 Friends worked with Anoka and Ramsey Counties and the cities of Mounds View, Arden Hills, New Brighton, and Shoreview to support acquisition of property to complete the Rice Creek Trail Corridor (a land and water trail), plus adjacent land for athletic fields. The solid support from the Friends and the surrounding communities led former Congressman Bruce Vento to take a special interest in the property.

Reutilization plan ignored

Vento established a Reutilization Committee in 1995 to make recommendations for the TCAAP site. The Friends actively supported recommendations which ultimately were included in the final Committee plan: at least 1,100 acres of contiguous land should be designed and managed as a regional park reserve; and 125 acres preserved for the Rice Creek Land and Water Trail. There was excited participation in developing the reutilization plan by dozens of citizens from the surrounding communities who saw this as essential to preserving a vanishing resource, open space for people and critters.

But the recommendations of the Reutilization Committee can not be followed just yet. First the Department of the Army must declare the property 'surplus.'

The Minnesota National Guard currently uses about half of the site for training. They allow some public recreational use. They are now seeking an additional 541

To support the National Guard acquisition write to Rep. Betty McCollum, 165 Western Ave. North # 17, St. Paul, MN 55104.

River Bluff restoration continues

Burning critical element in management plan

acres, including the Rice Creek area, to be transferred to them from the Army. The Guard prides itself on working with the community and its environmental sensitivity and consider its acquisition to be guaranteed protection for the site. They express strong support for the Reutilization Committee objectives.

From the point of view of the Army Material Command (AMC) in Washington, D.C., the TCAAP site is little more than a contaminated site with potential liability. If AMC could dispose of the land for certain industrial purposes, the environmental clean-up standards would not be quite so rigorous. Such a deal! Ignoring the Reutilization Committee recommendations, the interests of the Minnesota National Guard and the surrounding community, the AMC invited developers to tour the site in preparation for making acquisition and development proposals. The first that the Friends, the Guard, or the cities and counties surrounding the site knew about this ominous change in plan was when the developers showed up for their tour.

The National Guard appears to be in the best position to secure and preserve the site. The Friends and Governor Jesse Ventura wrote Thomas E. White, Secretary of the Army, supporting the Guard's proposal. There have also been several meetings with Congresswoman Betty McCollum, who is committed to protect the area.

This threat is real and could be immediate. For more information about how you can help protect this area, please call 651-698-4543.

Removal of buckthorn and other invasive plants is almost complete in the project area along the Mississippi river from Emerald Street (the St. Paul city limits) to the Highway 5 bridge. During the winter, work continues but it is less visible than the cutting and hauling of buckthorn that people may have seen during the last two summers. But the winter's work may have as much impact on the long-term impact of the project as the actual removal. That is, development of the long-awaited Management Plan.

The project Management Plan is a blueprint for ongoing maintenance activities on the river bluff. The City of St. Paul Division of Parks and Recreation is charged with implementing the plan to continue the restoration work started under the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) grant. Included in the Plan is the natural resource inventory, volunteer participation plan, history and goals for managing the bluff. Several maps highlight natural community remnants, socio-cultural features, volunteer accessibility sites and land cover. These maps provide fascinating information for anyone interested in finding out exactly what is there, hidden away before our very eyes. If you would like to review the plan or just study the maps, it is available at the Merriam Park and Highland Park libraries.

Prescribed burns are a critical element in maintaining most natural areas. Without periodic fire, invasive species take hold and soon can dominate the area. Fire is included in the short- and long- range management plan for the Mississippi River Bluff. During the spring several small burns are planned in areas where there is enough fuel to sustain an effective burn. Along much of the bluff, there is so little branch, grass and leaf litter that burning would not be effective. Burns will be scheduled when weather conditions are favorable. In a real miracle of rejuvenation, within a week of a controlled burn, new vegetation will begin to show. Native seeds, dormant because of lack of light, will begin to germinate and shortly, greenery will replace the ash left by the burn.

For more information about prescribed woodland burns visit the friends website, www.friendsoftheparks.org/burn.html

Budget woes threaten St. Paul parks

Wanted: Gardeners to adopt and beautify parks and open spaces - grants available

The prospect of a fire in the river valley has raised concerns among some of the home-owners adjacent to the bluff. The Friends held a series of informational meetings for interested citizens to answer any questions. "People confuse a prescribed burn with a wild fire," said Cindy Schwie, grant project director. "When people learn more about how it is done and the precautions that are taken, most of the neighbors have been satisfied. A prescribed burn would be like a fire in a fireplace. A wild fire would be like a fire in your waste basket. There is real danger in a fire in a waste basket. On the other hand, people burn in their fireplace regularly without problems." Prescribed burns are regularly used by the St. Paul, Ramsey County, Minneapolis and Hennepin County park systems. The burns along the river will use state-of-the-art methods, including having the fire department on site to assist should any problem arise.

Money is in short supply in St. Paul right now and it only threatens to get worse. To balance this year's budget the City drew on reserves. When next year rolls around, the coffers will be nearly drained. To make matters worse, the proposals to balance the State budget cut Aid to Local Governments.

Why such dire circumstances? For the last eight years Saint Paul has not raised taxes, even though the cost of providing services continued to rise. The number of acres of park that must be operated and maintained increased during that time. During a time of plenty, maintenance was deferred. "Foolishly, we did not fix the roof when the sun was shining. There are now storm clouds on the horizon and the roof still needs repairs," said Jeanne Weigum, Friends board member.

The Saint Paul Budget Office predicted last fall that the tax levy would have to be raised 13% just to maintain the same level of services. Few politicians campaign on a platform built on a 13% tax increase. The short fall for Saint Paul is in the Operating Fund.

There are four main departments that get their money from the operating fund: police; fire; parks; and libraries. Few elected officials are likely to see cutting police and fire as a substantial part of the budget control process. That leaves parks and libraries facing the brunt of the cuts.

"We have written to Mayor Randy Kelly to ask that he work with the Friends to establish a blue ribbon committee to look at all options for funding parks. We hope the Mayor will work with us to insure that the 2003 budget will not wipe out major park spending," said Theresa Benda, Friends President.

The Friends are seeking gardeners/volunteers to adopt parks and open spaces for the purpose of beautifying them with sustainable gardens. If you are a member of a garden club or just a gardener who would like to gather friends and family to adopt a city or county park, or open space, we look forward to hearing from you. When responding, please think about whether you have a certain park or open space in mind, the nature of the plantings you would like to plant and maintain in the parks, and the sustainability of the planting/garden.

The Friends will then work with the county and city officials to pair up volunteers with their desired sites, or if there is no special site you have in mind, to find a site for your group. Additionally, the Friends are willing to make small grants to volunteer groups in order to assist them in buying plants or other materials

Trees Trees Trees

necessary for their projects. Please call 651-698-4543 to let us know of your group's interest and what site, if any they are interested in adopting.

Your 2002 tree sale brochure is in the mail. You can purchase trees and shrubs for your own use and you can also purchase trees to be planted in parks and public places in the City of St. Paul, Anoka, Apple Valley, Bloomington, Brooklyn Park, Cottage Grove, Champlin, Egan, Eden Prairie, Mendota Heights, St. Louis Park, West St. Paul, and Woodbury as well as parks in Anoka, Dakota and Ramsey County and most cities in Ramsey County.

We work hard to select trees and shrubs that are hardy, disease resistant, attractive, offer year round interest and food or habitat for wildlife. We also like to offer something a bit new, different and hard to find. This year we score on all counts. All of our selections are hardy in zone 4 and many are hardy further north to zone 3. We offer trees for small lots, large yards or parks. We try to offer something for everyone. If you have a favorite tree or shrub which is not on our list, call us with your suggestions. We are always open to new ideas. Love the selection but absolutely no place to plant another thing? Contribute it to a park near you. It will be there for you and yours to enjoy for decades to come.

Trees offered this year are: Northwood Maple, River Birch, Red Oak, Autumn Purple Ash, Royal Star Magnolia, Prairifire Crab, Eastern White Pine and Black Hills Spruce.

Shrubs are: Wedgewood Blue Lilac, Ruby Spice Clethra, Onandaga Viburnum, Downy Arrowwood Viburnum. Also available is Aunt Dee Wisteria, a hard to find, hardy blooming vine.

**The Friends of Parks & Trails
in Saint Paul & Ramsey County
1621 Beechwood Avenue
Saint Paul, MN 55116**

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit #3413
Saint Paul, MN

**CHANGE SERVICE
REQUESTED**