

Park Notes

A newsletter of the Friends of St. Paul and Ramsey County Parks
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Important decisions ahead for TCAAP

A brief history

The Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant (TCAAP) appears on the verge of becoming much more than it currently is. It appears destined to be a Minnesota National Guard training facility, housing, industrial development, and a park and wildlife area. After decades of preparation including the 1996 Vento Reutilization Plan, the first 'surplussing' of the army's property is slated. But nothing is ever simple and certainly nothing about the TCAAP site has been easy.

The old 'arsenal' as it is usually called, encompasses 2730 acres of developed areas, wetlands, rolling hills, and a meandering Rice Creek. The arsenal was most active during WWII and the cold war. Much of the activity that previously went on there has been phased out leaving "surplus" army property. It also left behind ammunition storage bunkers and seriously contaminated land and ground water. Some of the buildings were removed during the last few years and there has been considerable environmental clean-up but contamination remains.

Anticipating the surplussing of the land, former congressman Bruce Vento convened a panel of interested people representing government, environmental, business and recreational interests to develop a framework for eventual use. The vision created through this process provides the broad template for how the land should be used once it passes from governmental control.

Soon after the Vento Plan was completed, the surplussing process seemed to hit a snag and there was little action beyond further environmental clean-up. There were some efforts to provide greater community access to the open space but the gates slammed shut in the wake of the 9-11 attacks. But the decommissioning process was inching forward. When federal government land is deemed to be surplus, other governmental bodies get the first crack at it and they can acquire it for no fees. If there are no takers, other military organizations can request it. If the parcel is still unclaimed, local units of government, if they intend to use it for purely public purposes such as parks, can claim the land, again at no cost. Should the land still be unclaimed, it then becomes available to developers and others at market prices.

As with many surplus properties, this one comes with a major league problem. It is contaminated and someone has to clean it up. The federal government would prefer that someone else is not them. In an effort to get out from under the financial obligation to clean up their mess, the federal government sometimes allows commercial developers to take over the land and deduct the cost of clean-up from the cost of the property. That could be an attractive alternative in this case and this may be driving some of the decisions that are currently being made. For example, there is a small area which the National Guard would like to acquire but the transfer is being held

“A road going through the middle of a wildlife corridor defeats the whole purpose of a corridor. The Vento re-Utilization Committee spent considerable time on this issue. Roadways don't complement wildlife corridors. The Vento Committee knew this and was committed to avoiding a slaughter zone. The City of Arden Hills must follow the intent of the Vento Committee. There are other ways around the problem that do not involve permanently destroying the critter connection. We must follow the intent of the Vento Committee.” said Craig Andresen, who served on the TCAAP reutilization Committee.

Samuel H. Morgan Trail Dedication

up. If the transfer were made to the National Guard, the ultimate financial obligation remains with the federal government. Since the feds really wants to get out of that obligation, they would prefer to sell that parcel for commercial development, quite probably for the cost of the abatement.

Ramsey County aims to acquire the land adjacent to Rice Creek (113 acres) to add to the Rice Creek North Regional Trail Corridor, a water and land trail. The creek extends 25 miles from the Mississippi River to the 25,000 acre Carlos Avery Wildlife Management area in Anoka County. The County seeks to acquire an additional 49 acre parcel which links the Rice Creek corridor to the property leased to the National Guard. Much of the National Guard area is open and provides rare wildlife habitat. The Vento plan calls for the National Guard area to eventually become a park reserve. The connection to Rice Creek is essential for the flow of water and the movement of animals through the area. And there-in lies the rub. No one objects to the County accessing the additional 49 acres. But some people, including some business interests, want a road through the parcel to facilitate future development. Environmentalists throw up their arms in dismay.

The attached map shows the areas in question. The two areas marked, “Army Surplus” which abutt I-35W are slated to be turned over to the City of Arden Hills where a variety of housing and commercial development is planned. The area marked Vento Plan Corridor is the 49 acres which the County wants and through which some in Arden hills have proposed to build a road. Interstate 35W is the freeway which is clearly visible on the left side of the map. Turtle Lake is just outside the National Guard property area.



Under a bright sun on a crisp September day, the citizens of Saint Paul paid one more tribute to park's devotee Sam Morgan by dedicating the trail along the Mississippi River from Highway 5 to Battle Creek Regional Park in his honor.

When Sam died two years ago at the age of 89 he left a tremendous community legacy of open spaces, natural areas and recreation areas. Along the way he was a mentor to many of the people who today are carrying on the work he began.

New Trail and Nature Sanctuary Link Lowertown, East Side Neighborhoods

Sam was one of the founders of the Friends in 1986 and his efforts played a pivotal role with two of the Friend's early projects, development of a long-range parks plan and protection of parkland from commercial development. The long range plan evolved from discussions of how park decisions seems to just happen without much connection to either the past or the future. Sam helped raise money to hire a consultant to work with a blue ribbon advisory committee which developed *A Plan for Parks, Trails and Open Space for St. Paul and Ramsey County* in 1989. The plan contained about 100 recommendations to guide the park system into the 21st Century. Many of those recommendations have been enacted, most prominently the establishment of parks commissions in both St. Paul and Ramsey County.

To protect parks from development pressure, Sam worked with the Saint Paul City Council and the Charter Commission for almost two years to prepare an amendment to the city charter which provided for 'no net loss' of park land. The amendment was unanimously approved by the Charter Commission and the City Council in 1991. Later a similar "no net loss" provision was approved by almost 85% of the voters to provide protection to Ramsey County park land.

Sam was a very special human being. He was particularly special to those working to preserve and protect our natural resources. His legacy will continue and his memory is honored by the Samuel H. Morgan Trail.

St. Paul's East Side is home to some of the most fascinating bicycle trails in the Twin Cities — paths that take riders along Lake Phalen, through historic Swede Hollow Park, and along the majestic bluffs of Mounds Park. To the frustration of many recreational enthusiasts and bicycle commuters, however, these trails dead end just east of Lowertown and the Mississippi River.

"You can see Lowertown from the East Side, but there is no safe, convenient way to bike or walk there," said East Side neighborhood activist Kristin "Murph" Dawkins. "It's a problem for East Side residents, the thousands of people who live and work downtown and for anyone who wants to enjoy the great trails in this part of the city."

A tangle of rail operations, highways and abandoned industrial land have thwarted efforts to make the needed trail connection. Until now. A community-driven coalition called the Lower Phalen Creek Project is working to transform the "no man's land" between the East Side and Lowertown into the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary — a 27-acre park with restored habitat for wildlife, interpreted walking paths and a trail connection that will fill a missing link in an 85-mile trail network.

"The East Side and Lowertown have joined hands to reclaim the valley that separates us and transform it into a beautiful new amenity," said Weiming Lu, a Lower Phalen Creek Project steering committee member and President of the Lowertown Redevelopment Corporation. "The project complements the housing and economic revitalization projects underway here and will make it more desirable for people to bicycle through and around our urban center."

Lu, Dawkins and other neighborhood leaders worked for more than seven years to plan, raise funds and do the other work needed to make the project a reality. More than 25 nonprofit organizations and government agencies are now part of the Lower Phalen Creek Project. The City of Saint Paul has adopted the community's plan for the land, and the project is being touted as a model public-private partnership.

A project partner will match private donations to the Fourth Street Trail Link. Tax deductible contributions made now will be doubled. People who give \$50 or more will receive a water-color poster of the sanctuary.

Contributions can be mailed to: Lower Phalen Creek Project, 925 Payne Avenue, Suite 201, St. Paul MN 55101.

Holiday gift trees: Trees for parks or trees for people

Trees include Discovery Elm, White Fringetree, Heritage Birch, Pink Spires Crab, Sugar Maple, Northern Red Oak, Black Hills Spruce, Japanese Tree Lilac.

Project partner, The Trust for Public Land, has helped raise all the funds needed to acquire the sanctuary site and is poised to help the city complete the purchase of the land from Burlington Northern-Santa Fe Railroad. The trail component of the project, known as the Fourth Street Trail link, will be part of the first phase of construction. Lower Phalen Creek Project partners have raised \$1.2 million of the \$1.6 million needed to install the trail link, mostly from federal, state and city government grant programs which require matching funds from private and local donors.

“We know people desperately want this trail link, as we are very close to achieving full funding for the project,” said Dawkins. “But it can’t move forward without donations to leverage the government funding.” *Article provided by Sarah Clark, Lower Phalen Creek Project. For more information, email sclark@bitstream.net or call 651-771-1152, Ext. 132.*

Sure, you can wait until next spring to purchase your tree from the Friends, but an even better idea is to give a tree as a holiday gift to a park or as a gift to a loved one. Companies sometimes give their best customers a holiday gift. This year that could be a commemorative tree planted in a park or public place in appreciation of the year of business collaboration. What better symbol, something that grows and flourishes.

Gift trees can be purchased for a park in the following communities:

County parks: Anoka, Dakota and Ramsey;

City parks: all cities in Ramsey County, City of Anoka, Apple Valley, Brooklyn Park, Champlin Cottage Grove, Eagan, Mendota Heights, St. Louis Park, West St. Paul and Woodbury.

Since some parks prefer a specific species, select a shade or evergreen tree on the Holiday Tree order Form. Trees for parks will be planted next growing season by park department employees. Gift trees for colleagues, friends or loved ones will be available next spring. We will remind you at planting time to come and pick up your tree. Each gift tree costs \$50.00. We will send an attractive gift announcing commemorative tree gifts or informing recipients that a tree has been purchased for them and will be available next spring. For additional information call 651-698-4543 or see our web site at www.friendsoftheparks.org.