

CITY OF GREENBELT, MARYLAND

FINAL REPORT of the FOREST PRESERVE TASK FORCE June 30, 2006

In October, 2003 the Greenbelt City Council established the Forest Preserve program, designated the first parcels as Forest Preserve, and established a Forest Preserve Task Force (FPTF). The task force was charged with the duty to draft maintenance and management guidelines which would provide the framework for the administration of the forest preserve article.

In addition to the preparation of the Management and Maintenance Guidelines, the task force was to identify additional city owned properties to be designated as Forest Preserve parcels, propose changes to the Forest Preserve article (City Code Chapter 12), and recommend if the Forest Preserve Task Force or a successor advisory body should be established as a permanent citizen advisory group.

The task force was required to submit its recommendations to the City Council within 18 months of the organization of the group. Following transmittal of the task force recommendations to the City Council, it was to respond to any suggestions, and prepare a final report on its activities, in anticipation of the termination of its appointment.

This final report fulfills the charge to the Forest Preserve Task Force. This report summarizes the activities of the task force, the major transmittals and recommendations of the task force, issues which the task force believes must be addressed by the City Council in furtherance of the forest preserve program, and the next steps to be taken related to the continuation of the work done by the task force, and the work remaining to be done.

Membership and Organization

The task force was to be composed of 11 members. Six of the members would be "at large", and five would be representatives from the standing city committees of the Advisory Planning Board, Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, Advisory Committee on Trees, Recycling and Environment Advisory Committee, and the Youth Advisory Committee.

Following the appointment of all members, the Forest Preserve Task Force (FPTF) held its first meeting in June, 2004. A regularly scheduled meeting of the task force was scheduled for the first Thursday of each month. The Chair

and Vice Chair were selected from the at-large membership. Over the next several months, the FPTF met on a monthly basis, developing a work plan. The task force took a walking tour of the North and South preserves in order to familiarize itself with the condition and character of the areas.

Over the first six months of the task force's term, there were two at-large member resignations. Both vacancies were promptly filled by the City Council. However, member representatives from the Advisory Planning Board and the Youth Advisory Committee stopped participating in the task force, so for the majority of the term of the task force, the task force operated with nine (9) active members.

Work Program

In the fall of 2004, the task force developed an outline for the management and maintenance guidelines. The guidelines would address a range of issues, including forest health, trail, maintenance, enforcement of park and preserve rules, special events, catastrophic events, and invasive species. In general, each month one chapter of the guidelines was drafted, reviewed, revised and finalized by the task force.

Where appropriate, the expertise of other advisory boards and committees was called upon to assist the task force. For example, during the discussion of trails, Parks and Recreation Advisory Board Chair Lola Skolnik met with the task force to discuss the experience zones concept, and barrier free planning. Chapters on invasive species and forest health were drafted by members of the Advisory Committee on Trees.

On a regular basis, representatives from the standing committees reported to their respective boards or committees on the activities of the FPTF. In turn, the representatives would convey to the task force feedback from the standing committees.

At the point the draft Management and Maintenance Guidelines was nearing final review the FPTF directed that representatives from the standing committees were to review the guidelines with their respective boards/committees. Feedback was incorporated into the final draft, which was approved by unanimous vote of the task force late in 2005. The draft Management and Maintenance Guidelines were transmitted to the City Council in December, 2005.

At the time the FPTF forwarded the draft guidelines, recommendations for revisions to the forest preserve article (Chapter 12), and a recommendation that the City Council create a permanent standing committee to continue the work of the task force, were also submitted to the City Council.

City Council Response

In February, 2006 the Forest Preserve Task Force met in worksession with the City Council to discuss the guidelines and recommendations of the task force. Minor changes to the guidelines were suggested by Council.

Regarding the forest preserve article, it was suggested during the work session that the process by which additional parcels may be added to the forest preserve should be subject to a referendum vote.¹ The reason to make the removal of the forest preserve designation difficult is that the designation is a tool to protect these forested areas. The referendum process would ensure that any effort to remove the forest preserve designation from a parcel would be endorsed by the electorate. Changing the process of designating forest preserves by adding time consuming steps, such as a referendum process, would be inconsistent with the intent of the program to facilitate the protection of forested resources.

There was additional discussion regarding the recommendation for the creation of a permanent forest preserve advisory committee or board. Concern that there would be overlap between the authority of the forest preserve committee and other standing boards and committees was voiced. The task force was directed by the City Council to further discuss the recommendation that a permanent advisory group be created to address issues on the forest preserve.

Submittals to City Council

The Forest Preserve Task Force was charged with the responsibility to address four major issues – production of management and maintenance guidelines for the forest preserve, provide recommendations for revisions to the forest preserve article of the city code (chapter 12), advise on the need for a permanent forest preserve advisory body, and suggest additions to the forest preserve. The task force has completed its assigned tasks, and has forwarded the following to the City Council:

- I. **Forest Preserve Management and Maintenance Guidelines** – This document consists of twelve chapters which address trails, signage, forest health, enforcement, invasive species, maintenance, catastrophic events, vegetation, clean-up and removal of debris, activities and special events and contingencies. While some guidelines, restrictions, and regulations could apply evenly to all forest preserve parcels, there are unique qualities, uses and conditions found in every preserve area which warrant special policy treatment. For example, the community gardens are, by strict application of the forest preserve article, an inconsistent use.

¹ The forest preserve article provides for the designation of city owned properties as forest preserve by majority vote of the City Council. However, the removal of parcels from the forest preserve designation requires voter approval via a referendum vote.

However, the community gardens are an integral component in the physical, social and cultural history of Greenbelt, and should be allowed to continue. It would be impossible to write a law which could address every special condition found in the forest preserve properties. Therefore, the task force addresses these unique conditions as contingencies to the management and maintenance guidelines. As new properties are considered for designation as forest preserve parcels, contingencies for existing uses and conditions can be added to the guidelines. The task force has found that this approach allows the city to protect existing uses as well as the larger forest preserve area.

The guidelines recognize that the location and physical characteristics of a wooded parcel, and existing patterns of public use and access, predict the level of the public's future use and experience of preserve areas. In other words, in areas where there are well used trails and paths resulting from hiking, it is reasonable to assume that Greenbelt's citizens will continue to hike through these forested areas. There is a specific area of the existing South Preserve, located between Hamilton Place and the extension of Gardenway to the Spellman Overpass, which shows heavy use. Instead of limiting public use of this part of the forest preserve, the guidelines suggest that some trails be designated in this area, subject to additional study. One of the benefits of having protected the forested areas in Greenbelt is the opportunity these lands present for a suburban community to experience and enjoy woodlands.

- II. **Proposed Revisions to the Forest Preserve Article** – Several minor revisions to the Forest Preserve Article of the City Code (chapter 12) are being recommended by the FPTF. None of the changes would significantly alter the process by which forest preserve parcels are designated, managed or controlled. During the City Council's work session with the FPTF, it was suggested that the process by which parcels are added to the forest preserve should be subject to the same referendum process as deletions from the forest preserve are treated. The task force discussed this suggestion, but does not support such a change. The value of the city's forested lands is reflected in the forest preserve administrative and legislative procedures. It is not suggested that the designation of city owned parcels as part of the forest preserve be undertaken precipitously or without full understanding of the protections, and corresponding limitations, placed on such properties. However, once the decision is made to include a property within the forest preserve, the associated protections are intended to be durable. Therefore, no changes to the process by which forest preserve parcels are designated, or undesignated, are recommended.
- III. **Draft Ordinance to Establish a Permanent Forest Preserve Advisory Committee** – The task force believes that the issues associated

with the management, maintenance, designation, enforcement and monitoring of the forest preserve properties and program, are best addressed by a citizen advisory group charged with that specific task. Issues associated with the forest preserve involve a variety of perspectives. This combination of perspectives has been well represented through the task force. While the advisory responsibilities associated with stewarding the forest preserve could be delegated to one of the existing standing committees, none of the city's existing standing committees is charged with the broad range of duties associated with the forest preserve. Concerns about coordination between advisory bodies is reasonable, but it is much more likely that coordination would be a greater challenge if the broad spectrum of issues associated with the forest preserve were parceled out between several different advisory groups.

The city has been well served by the extensive citizen advisory network which has been established over time. The forest preserve program is not limited to issues relevant to parks and recreation, planning, the environment or trees. It cuts across all of these areas. Accordingly, an advisory committee established to advise on the forest preserve is appropriate and recommended.

- IV. **Recommended Additions to the Forest Preserve** – The City of Greenbelt has been very proactive in acquiring undeveloped parcels of land in order to preserve open space. These properties serve a variety of open space and recreation needs. It is recommended that the forest preserve designation be assigned to those parcels obtained for the primary purpose of protecting and preserving open space. Accordingly, it is recommended that Parcel 7 (Boxwood Preserve), Parcel 15 (Belle Point) and the Sunrise Property be extended the protection of the forest preserve program. It has also been recommended that Parcel 12, adjacent to the North Preserve, also be designated as part of the forest preserve. Each of these properties was acquired for the primary purpose of protecting open space. Contingencies to address the existing open space uses at Boxwood, a future path on the Belle Point property, the Observatory and the Yard Waste Compost area, have been included in the guidelines.

Future Steps

As the Forest Preserve Task Force concludes its mission, there still is significant, important work to be done. The following are future tasks that a successor advisory group should address:

- I. **Forest Health** – The task of preparing a management and maintenance plan for the forest preserve cannot be fully and comprehensively completed until the health of the forest is assessed. Issues such as

biodiversity, diversity of the forest colony, changes in the composition of the forest population, animal population, health of vegetation, among many other indicators of forest health, require the consultation of a trained forester. It is the recommendation of the Forest Preserve Task Force that the city retain the services of a professional and licensed forester, who will inspect, evaluate and report on the condition of the North and South Preserves, and who may, in addition, consult with and advise the city on actions and strategies to enhance, protect and maintain the health of these forested areas.

- II. **Trails** – The management and maintenance guidelines suggest that designated trails may be considered in Area D of the South Preserve. This recommendation recognizes that this area of the South Preserve already experiences significant public use, not all of which is appropriate. Further, it is suggested that in order to protect the health of the most pristine areas of the forest preserve, it may be advisable to direct casual public hiking, exploring etc... to that area of the forest preserve most suitable for such focused use. While it is not a recommendation of the task force that trails be designated anywhere in the preserve, including Area D, the task force does recommend that the existing trails system in area D be mapped and evaluated. This mapping exercise will provide valuable information about the location of existing trails, points of connection, condition of the trails, and use patterns. Once this information is compiled, there can be further discussions about the future of designated trails. Certainly, such discussions would involve other advisory boards and committees, such as the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board.
- III. **Update of the Management and Maintenance Guidelines** - The Management and Maintenance Guidelines were drafted based on the initial designation of the North and South Preserve areas. While contingencies have been recommended for those additional areas being suggested as additions to the forest preserve, the guidelines should be reviewed every time a new parcel is added, as well as on a semi-regular, basis, to make certain that the guidelines are timely and relevant to current conditions.
- IV. **Coordination with Existing Boards, Committees and Community Groups-** The forest preserve program reflects an interdisciplinary approach to the stewardship of the city's limited and valuable forested resources. The foundation for the forest preserve program is not singularly based in resource protection, recreation, tree biology and management, planning, environmental protection, or any other specific policy area. The city government, and the city as a whole, is rich with expertise of citizen volunteers. The proposed Forest Preserve Advisory Committee would rely heavily on the continued and regular consultation

with other city advisory boards and committees, in addition to groups and organizations outside the city government. It is the sincere belief of the FPTF that good policy for the forest preserve must be balanced policy, and the contributions of all boards, committees and interested citizens and groups is imperative. The task force, and its successor group, should be committed to make sure that all voices are heard when issues impacting the forest preserve are discussed.

- V. **Staff Liaison and Support** - The FPTF was supported and assisted through the Department of Planning and Community Development, and most specifically, the department director. It is suggested that staff support for the task force's successor group continue to be provided through this department.

Conclusion

With the submission of the Draft Management and Maintenance Guidelines for the Forest Preserve, recommendations for the designation of additional areas as forest preserve, changes to the forest preserve article, a proposed ordinance to establish a permanent forest preserve advisory committee, and this final report of the Forest Preserve Task Force, this group has fulfilled its charge from the City Council.

We are proud of the work completed by this group. Drawing upon the passion and the expertise of both citizen members and representatives from other city boards and committees, the task force found a balanced view of the opportunities and challenges associated with the stewardship of these valued forested areas. As we conclude our work, we express our thanks to the City Council for allowing us to be the public's representatives in the important role associated with the initial work in the city's forest preserve.

The Task Force's efforts would not have been nearly as successful if not for the outstanding support and frequent insights provided by Celia Craze. Celia worked with us through the long hours of brainstorming, discussion, and debate that it took the taskforce to find its way to the conclusions it has submitted. Many of Celia's comments during our discussions added insight, experience and direction to the proceeding. Celia's efforts are all the more impressive when placed in the context of the large-scale development and planning ongoing in Greenbelt which require her time and energy. The taskforce and the chair want to recognize her effort and contribution to this undertaking and express to her and the City Council our deepest appreciation and thanks for her meaningful contributions to this effort.

The reports and recommendations we forward to the City Council reflect only the initial steps in what must be a sustained and focused commitment to proactively manage the forest preserve lands. The effort should not end here,

but should continue through a collaboration of citizen advisors, experts in the field of forestry health and management, staff support, and Council leadership.

Respectfully submitted,

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