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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**TITLE:** Westwood Hills Nature Center Project

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** None at this time. Staff desires to discuss and receive direction from the Council regarding the purpose and desired outcomes of the proposed Interpretive Center building at the Westwood Hills Nature Center.

**POLICY CONSIDERATION:** Is the purpose and desired outcomes of a new interpretive center, as expressed in this report, in keeping with the City Councils expectations? If so, should staff move forward with the next steps of advancing this project by selecting an architect and beginning the schematic design process?

**SUMMARY:** The City completed a comprehensive Master Plan for the Westwood Hills Nature Center in May 2016. This plan addressed facility development and programming goals for the Nature Center. The plan included the nature center facilities, outdoor programming sites, infrastructure and programming needs. The master plan serves as the vision, identifies guiding principles, resource allocation and an action plan to meet the identified needs of the community and to assist the city in planning for future building development at the Nature Center. Citizen input played a key role in shaping this plan.

After the City Council tour of Eastman Nature Center, the Council discussed the need for clarity and agreement regarding the intended purpose and desired outcomes of the future Interpretive Center building. Under the “Discussion” section of this report staff has provided suggested language identifying the purpose and outcomes of the future Interpretive Center for Council consideration.

**FINANCIAL OR BUDGET CONSIDERATION:** The City’s CIP has \$300,000 in 2017 to begin preliminary design for the construction of a new Nature Center building.

**VISION CONSIDERATION:** St. Louis Park is committed to being a connected and engaged community. St. Louis Park is committed to being a leader in environmental stewardship.

**SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:** Discussion  
Community Input (from Master Plan)  
Estimated Debt Service Schedule

**Prepared by:** Jason T. West, Recreation Superintendent  
Mark Oestreich, Westwood Hills Nature Center Manager  
**Reviewed by:** Cynthia S. Walsh, Director of Operations and Recreation  
Brian Hoffman, Inspections Director  
Tim Simon, Chief Financial Officer  
**Approved by:** Tom Harmening, City Manager

## **DISCUSSION**

**BACKGROUND:** The City completed a comprehensive Master Plan for the Westwood Hills Nature Center in May 2016. This plan addressed facility development and programming goals. The plan included the nature center facilities, outdoor programming sites, infrastructure and programming needs. The master plan serves as the vision, identifies guiding principles, resource allocation and an action plan to meet the identified needs of the community and to assist the city in planning for future building development at the Nature Center. Citizen input played a key role in shaping this plan. This input is laid out on pages 18 and 19 of the Master Plan, which is attached for your reference.

### **PURPOSE AND OUTCOMES:**

Statement of Purpose: In practice, Westwood Hills Nature Center will model and promote stewardship, sustainability and a deeper ecological understanding through direct experience, using our resources to provide connecting places for all and enhance quality of life in the community.

Intended Outcomes: Creation of a multi-use facility to expand programming, improve accessibility, offer additional rental opportunities, improve staff workspace, increase storage capacity, provide for a separate exhibit/exploration area, and accommodate educational groups while allowing the general public to enjoy the facility separate from large groups.

### Design Considerations:

- The current size of the Interpretive Center Building is 2,700 sq. ft. The proposed size of the building is projected to be 12,000 to 15,000 sq. ft., similar in size to Eastman which is 14,000 sq. ft.
- Energy efficient based on the most current standards
- Low maintenance both inside and out
- Building location closer to the parking lot
- Separate community gathering space that does not interfere with programming
- Warmer and inviting feel
- Maintain and expand three classrooms for adult and youth programs. Insure the classrooms are flexible so that they can open into one large room for reservations
- Flexibility/accommodating for Hearing Loop
- Target audience is everyone
  - Increased adult programming outside and inside of Interpretive Center building
  - Interactive exhibits that users can enjoy without interfering with programs taking place
  - Increased youth and family programming that can occur simultaneously with programs occurring in other rooms
- Restrooms available for public even during off hours
- Enhance the existing partnership with St. Louis Park School District through programming opportunities for Pre-K to senior adults
- Appropriate staff office space and work areas
- Public gathering area (i.e. interpretive exhibits, animal display, etc.)
- Adequate storage locations
- Consider creating a small rental room that can be used by book clubs or neighborhood groups

**FINANCIAL AND BUDGET IMPLICATIONS:** The City's CIP has \$300,000 in 2017 to begin preliminary design for the construction of a new Nature Center building, the current CIP (2017-2026) estimates an \$11 million project in 2019. Based on a 20-year bond at a rate of 3.5% (only an estimate) the annual impact to the median value home (\$240,100) would range from \$32-\$35 per year. The size and term of the bond will be modified as we annually update the CIP and the estimates.

Based on the proposed goals for the Nature Center building and related site changes, the Master Plan process developed the estimated cost for a tentative 2019 start. This is a cost higher than what was reported for the Eastman Nature Center when construction of that facility began in 2011.

A sustainable building design which focuses on energy conservation, material types, occupant health, and possible renewable energy sources will have a higher initial cost. Additionally, incorporating maintenance free exterior and low maintenance interior materials at a higher initial cost, will provide a building with lower future operating expenditures. This approach will help maintain the buildings appearance and increase useful longevity.

Provisions for increased parking, utility services, emergency power generation, and the continuing trend of significantly rising building construction costs during the past few years are reflected in the proposed project budget.

**NEXT STEPS:** If directed by Council, staff would move forward with this project beginning with selecting an architectural firm to work with. We would come back to the City Council at the completion of each step below to check in and affirm direction to move to the next step.

1. Select an Architecture firm
2. Schematic Design
3. Design Development
4. Construction Documents



#### COMMUNITY INPUT

Based on an understanding of the existing conditions and conversations with the community and staff, it is very apparent that the (WHNC) does a number of things wonderfully. The WHNC also has a number of challenges. The programming, energy, and creativity of the staff often make up for the challenges of the building and space.

The main emphasis and focus of the community comments that were gathered online, during the Halloween party, and during the first community meeting, is that WHNC is great as it is. Change very little unless change is required to allow WHNC to function and continue to offer the great programming it always has.

Many of these sentiments are not new to the center or program. Some of the original programming work that was completed prior to the construction of the 1981 building identified a number of needs that still remain today. The existing building does provide a space for staff and a space to gather but does not provide room to truly realize the WHNC's full potential.

A number of the program aspects outlined during the early planning for the original 1981 WHNC area all sentiments that align and resonate with the information received and discussed with the community, city, and staff. These program aspects include:

- Support full range of environmental programs
- Reflect concern of awareness for natural environment
- Meet challenges of seasonal needs for curriculum
- Flexible and adaptable design to meet variable situations
- Nature is the focal point of the site-not building
- Building should complement site and blend into surroundings
- Function is to support programs
- Design should express need to conserve and utilize various forms of energy available
- Ease of maintenance
- Configuration of rooms should create feeling of openness and intimacy with the outdoors
- Minimize visual and audio distractions

This original vision for the center's main focus is still valid today. It demonstrates how the center has been steadfast in its goals. It also demonstrates that there is a parallel to the issues identified by staff and the community today and that a number of the issues and goals remain unsatisfied. The challenges of the existing building make the full realization of these aspects very difficult. The limited space and inability to divide the space both physically and acoustically limits the ability to achieve

many of the center's goals. Programming is often altered based on how many the building can fit or schedules are based on when no other activity is scheduled onsite rather than what is needed or desired for the community.

Based on the deficiencies, needs, and how the site is currently configured, the design team looked at a number of options. These options included expanding the existing building footprint at the current location or providing a new facility at numerous locations on the property. A presentation of the options was made to city staff. Based on city staff input, a preliminary recommendation to relocate the main building to the south was presented during the second community meeting.

At the meeting, the design team discussed the facility's needs and offered images and diagrams of how a new facility could be designed and situated on the site and to determine peoples' reaction to a number of varying facility types. Removing the existing building allows expanded programming to occur adjacent to the water feature and garden. Bringing the facility building further to the south also allows parking to remain relatively in the same location. This keeps the impact of the construction on the site to a contained area and allows the many other natural features of the center to remain untouched.

Those attending felt that the ideal building would fit into the larger natural context of the site and would disappear. Images of grass roofs and open window walls for viewing were preferred over more utilitarian structures. Planned outdoor space was discussed and opportunities for development of alternative gathering areas within the building were reviewed but overall the comments reflected on what the facility needs to do in order to perform and maintain the great feel and function of it currently offers.

Energy efficiency and sustainable practices were seen as opportunities and necessities. Alternative energy and best practice for thermal performance were noted. These goals were also reinforced at the city level and future design should strive to meet the criteria of net zero.

Similar nature center facilities either just completed or in planning, confirm the vision and necessary physical changes needed at the WHNC. Eastman Nature Center just recently completed a new building and determined that in order to adequately provide the space and facility they need, the new building needed to be just under 12,000 SF. Many of these facilities include ample staff space for quiet work, activity preparation, and storage. Two to three classrooms, sized to accommodate 50 students is very typical. Varied types of gathering from small groups to areas that can hold mid-sized events are designed into the overall layout.

**Purpose:** Westwood Nature Center (Charter Bonds)  
**Dated:** 2019  
**Original Amount:** \$11,000,000  
**Term (years):** 20  
**Subject to Debt Limit:** Yes  
**Average Coupon:** 3.500%

Term	Year Principal Paid 2/1	DEBT SERVICE PAYMENTS			OUTSTANDING BONDS	SOURCE OF FUNDS FOR DEBT SERVICE PAYMENTS									
		Principal	Interest	Total		P&I Subject to Tax Levy	105% of Levy	Less: Special Assessment	Less: Sanitary Sewer	Less: Water	Less: Storm Water	Less: Tax Increment	Less: Other Revenues	Net Tax Levy	Total Source of Funds
	2019	0	0	0	\$11,000,000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1	2020	390,000	385,000	775,000	\$10,610,000	775,000	813,750	0	0	0	0	0	0	813,750	813,750
2	2021	400,000	371,350	771,350	\$10,210,000	771,350	809,918	0	0	0	0	0	0	809,918	809,918
3	2022	415,000	357,350	772,350	\$9,795,000	772,350	810,968	0	0	0	0	0	0	810,968	810,968
4	2023	430,000	342,825	772,825	\$9,365,000	772,825	811,466	0	0	0	0	0	0	811,466	811,466
5	2024	445,000	327,775	772,775	\$8,920,000	772,775	811,414	0	0	0	0	0	0	811,414	811,414
6	2025	460,000	312,200	772,200	\$8,460,000	772,200	810,810	0	0	0	0	0	0	810,810	810,810
7	2026	480,000	296,100	776,100	\$7,980,000	776,100	814,905	0	0	0	0	0	0	814,905	814,905
8	2027	495,000	279,300	774,300	\$7,485,000	774,300	813,015	0	0	0	0	0	0	813,015	813,015
9	2028	510,000	261,975	771,975	\$6,975,000	771,975	810,574	0	0	0	0	0	0	810,574	810,574
10	2029	530,000	244,125	774,125	\$6,445,000	774,125	812,831	0	0	0	0	0	0	812,831	812,831
11	2030	550,000	225,575	775,575	\$5,895,000	775,575	814,354	0	0	0	0	0	0	814,354	814,354
12	2031	570,000	206,325	776,325	\$5,325,000	776,325	815,141	0	0	0	0	0	0	815,141	815,141
13	2032	590,000	186,375	776,375	\$4,735,000	776,375	815,194	0	0	0	0	0	0	815,194	815,194
14	2033	610,000	165,725	775,725	\$4,125,000	775,725	814,511	0	0	0	0	0	0	814,511	814,511
15	2034	630,000	144,375	774,375	\$3,495,000	774,375	813,094	0	0	0	0	0	0	813,094	813,094
16	2035	650,000	122,325	772,325	\$2,845,000	772,325	810,941	0	0	0	0	0	0	810,941	810,941
17	2036	675,000	99,575	774,575	\$2,170,000	774,575	813,304	0	0	0	0	0	0	813,304	813,304
18	2037	700,000	75,950	775,950	\$1,470,000	775,950	814,748	0	0	0	0	0	0	814,748	814,748
19	2038	720,000	51,450	771,450	\$750,000	771,450	810,023	0	0	0	0	0	0	810,023	810,023
20	2039	750,000	26,250	776,250	\$0	776,250	815,063	0	0	0	0	0	0	815,063	815,063
	2040	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2041	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2042	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2043	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2044	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2045	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2046	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2047	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2048	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2049	0	0	0	\$0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>11,000,000</b>	<b>4,481,925</b>	<b>15,481,925</b>		<b>15,481,925</b>	<b>16,256,021</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>16,256,021</b>	<b>16,256,021</b>