
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TITLE: Westwood Hills Nature Center Master Plan Update

RECOMMENDED ACTION: The purpose of this report and study session presentation is to provide the City Council with the results of the final Westwood Hills Nature Center Master Plan.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS: Does the Master Plan present ideas consistent with the direction the City Council would like to see for future planning of the Westwood Hills Nature Center?

In preparation for future discussions about possible improvements to the Nature Center, is the information provided in this master plan sufficient, or is there other information the Council desires?

SUMMARY: The city hired Miller Dunwiddie Architecture to create a comprehensive master plan to address the facility development and programming goals for the Westwood Hills Nature Center. The Westwood Hills Nature Center interpretive center is undersized and the building is in poor condition. The poor conditions of this facility and the success of the programs we offer at this site, with limited program space, were the impetus behind a master planning process. After undertaking a community engagement process, the master plan includes components such as a facility study and program evaluation including: site plans and location of a new interpretive center, assessment of multipurpose rooms with educational components and options for a large gathering space, parking lot needs, etc. along with current and future program needs.

FINANCIAL OR BUDGET CONSIDERATION: The Master Plan study is budgeted at \$50,000 and was approved in the 2015 CIP budget. At this point in time, it is estimated the improvements to the Nature Center, including a new interpretive center building and enlarged parking lot, is in the \$12 million range (very preliminary).

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: Westwood Hills Nature Center Master Plan

Prepared by: Mark Oestreich, Manager of Westwood Hills Nature Center
Jason T. West, Recreation Superintendent

Reviewed by: Cynthia S. Walsh, Director of Operations and Recreation

Approved by: Tom Harmening, City Manager

DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND: The Westwood Hills Nature Center interpretive center is undersized for the programs we offer. In addition, the building is in poor condition. When it rains, water seeps through the walls causing puddles to form on the floor. The heating system is also in poor condition. The poor conditions of this facility and the success of the programs we offer at this site, with limited program space, were the impetus behind a master planning process. The master plan includes topics such as a facility study and program evaluation including, but not limited to, site plan and location of the interpretive center, assessment of multipurpose rooms with educational components and large gathering space, parking lot needs, along with current and future program assessment needs.

Citizen input has played a key role in this plan. There have been several events conducted where Miller Dunwiddie gathered input from the community in regards to developing the master plan.

PUBLIC PROCESS: Residents were included in the process listed below.

Program and facility survey for participants of the following events:

- October 16 & 17: Halloween Party (Westwood Hills Nature Center)
 - Approximately 200 participated in the survey
- October 23: Halloween Party (The Rec Center, 3700 Monterey Drive)
 - Information on public meetings distributed

On-line survey

- 35 on-line surveys were completed

Initial Public Input Meeting (Westwood Hills Nature Center):

- October 27, 6 – 8 p.m.
 - 20 attendees at meeting

Second Public Input Meeting (Westwood Hills Nature Center):

- January 12, 2016, 6 – 8 p.m.
 - 35 attendees at meeting

Citizen input played a key role in shaping this plan. This really helped the architects understand the first-hand issues with the current facility. Meetings were publicized via postcards sent to residents, the city's website and social media, informing the School District, utilizing an email blast to past program users and promoting the meeting on Park TV. To gain additional input, Miller Dunwiddie met with parks maintenance staff, programming staff, and volunteers.

PRESENT CONSIDERATIONS: The common themes that emerged from the master plan are as follows:

- Moving the building location closer to the parking lot for convenience and accessibility yet keeping it tucked back into the trees to keep a more natural setting as much as possible.
- Increasing the number of parking stalls to accommodate all the users of the building and outside amenities.

- Increasing the size of meeting rooms to allow for accommodating 50 people in each small multi-purpose rooms and allowing them to open up to have capacity for 150 participants for special events and large gathering space.
- Design the interpretive center building to incorporate net zero/energy efficient standards.
- Current interpretive center location would be repurposed as an outdoor education/community gathering space.

NEXT STEPS: Staff is not expecting a decision at this meeting. This meeting was intended to present the Master Plan and the concepts that came out of the process. Should the Council at some point in time want to continue the plan for a new facility, the next steps are as follows:

- Schematic Design Phase
- Design Development Phase
- Construction Documents Phase

If a new building is not in the plans for future consideration, facilities maintenance staff will have to undertake a significant effort to evaluate the existing facility and plan for major renovations. At this point, we do not have an estimate as to what that might cost. Brian Hoffman will be present at the meeting if there are further questions about the existing building.