
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TITLE: Westwood Hills Nature Center Project Update

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Per Council directive this topic has been placed on the agenda for further discussion. Staff also desires to update Council on work it has done with the architect to address design issues brought up by the Council on December 11 and 18.

POLICY CONSIDERATION: Does the revised schematic plan reflect the council's comments and suggestions as staff and consultants move into Design Development phase?

SUMMARY: On May 23, 2016 Council approved the Master Plan for Westwood Hills Nature Center (WHNC). On December 11 and 18, 2017 the Council reviewed the schematic design plans and provided various comments and suggestions. On December 18 the Council approved the schematic design and staff was asked to bring this topic back for discussion in January. The schematic design included in this packet has been modified to address some of the suggestions made by Council members at the previous two meetings. The revised plan has resulted in the project cost being reduced to approximately \$12 million.

The HGA design team has been using the Master Plan as a guide to create a schematic design. Through the Master Plan process it was discovered by receiving public and staff input that there is definitely a need to have three multi-purpose rooms. The main users of the nature center are walk-in visitors, youth/adult/family program participants, youth in day camps, grade school groups, preschool groups, birthday parties, etc. The majority of people that participate in programming and services are from St. Louis Park and represent 56% of the total program count. Additionally, people from 78 other Minnesota cities and seven additional states have been recorded attending programs at Westwood Hills Nature Center.

Based on Council input, the design team is working towards a "Zero Energy" certified building, which means one hundred percent of the building's energy needs on a net annual basis are supplied by on-site renewable energy <https://www.living-future.org/net-zero/certification/>.

Last fall staff ran this project through the City's Race and Equity Toolkit to ensure the building and programming is conducive for all demographics. The Discussion portion of this report outlines those findings.

FINANCIAL OR BUDGET CONSIDERATION: The proposed source of funding is GO Bonds. The issuance of GO Bonds requires an affirmative vote of at least 6 of 7 councilmembers.

VISION CONSIDERATION: St. Louis Park is committed to being a leader in environmental stewardship. We will increase environmental consciousness and responsibility in all areas of city business.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS: Discussion
Revised Schematic Design

Prepared by: Jason T. West, Recreation Superintendent
Cynthia S. Walsh, Operations and Recreation Director

Approved by: Tom Harmening, City Manager

DISCUSSION

BACKGROUND: On May 23, 2016 Council approved the master plan for Westwood Hills Nature Center (WHNC). The poor conditions of this facility along with the success of the programs we offer at this site, with limited program space, were the impetus behind a master planning process. 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 in poor condition and doesn't function properly.

As a part of the Master Plan work, an extensive public process took place which included public meetings, surveys at special events, online surveys, etc. Citizen input played a key role in shaping this plan. There have also been recent events conducted where input was gathered from the community in regards to the master plan and the proposed interpretive center.

FINDINGS FROM THE MASTER PLAN: 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 into the trees to keep a more natural setting as much as possible.
- Create a gathering space where people can use the indoor space without interfering with the classrooms.
- Increasing the size of multi-purpose rooms to allow for accommodating 50 people in each small multi-purpose room and allowing them to open up to have capacity for 150 participants for special events and large gathering space. It has been the experience in other recently built nature centers that three multi-purpose rooms are very typical to accommodate facility needs. By creating three multi-purpose rooms it allows staff flexibility in responding to programming and rental requests.
- Increasing the number of parking stalls to accommodate all the users of the building and outside amenities.
- Design the interpretive center building to be energy efficient.
- Current interpretive center location would be repurposed as an outdoor education/community gathering space.
- Overall building condition is poor and the building size is too small for current use.
- Due to the number of deficiencies and poor conditions of the existing building, reusing the building is not a wise investment.

SCHEMATIC DESIGN COMPONENTS: The revised schematic design addresses the questions and suggestions provided by Council members as well as most of the program and space desires of the original Master Plan. Included in the attached schematic design are spaces for: four mews for raptors (used to be five), two multi-purpose rooms that facilitate 50 people and one that facilitates 20 people (used to be 50 people with the possibility of opening up into the gathering space). This area still opens up into one larger space that can be used for programs or rentals with room for 120 (was 150). The plan still includes a catering kitchen for use by staff and people renting the multi-purpose rooms, exhibit and gathering space, a lounge area for people to sit and observe nature, a conference room for use by staff or resident gatherings, staff offices and all the back of house space for storage, mechanical, raptor and animal care etc.

Spatial Points of Reference:

- The current nature center program/exhibit space is about the same size as the “Exhibit” gathering space shown on the schematic design (highlighted in yellow).
- Classrooms B and C together on the schematic plan (highlighted in green) are about the same size as the Council chambers.
- The foot print of the proposed Nature Center building is about the same size as the footprint of City Hall for one floor.
- Classroom A is slightly smaller than the Community Room at City Hall.

The original schematic design was presented to the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission at their November 29 meeting. The Commissioners provided great suggestions about pedestrian flow and trail circulation. They were supportive of a design that works towards zero energy hoping that those elements could be used as teaching tools as well as part of the interpretive exhibits. They recommended that the schematic design be presented to the City Council. On December 18, 2017 Council approved the Schematic Design.

CURRENT AND FUTURE PROGRAMMING NEEDS: Below are typical programs that would be taking place in the multi-purpose rooms in the newly constructed nature center.

Current programming includes:

- Summer Camps
- Spring Break Camps
- Winter Break Camps
- Puppet Story Time
- Birthday Parties
- Tuesday Turtles Preschool
- Weekend Family Programs
- Campfire Programs
- Adult Bird Hikes
- Adult Continuing Education
- Homeschool Groups
- Preschool/Nursery School Groups
- Elementary School Groups
- Middle/High School Groups
- Boy Scouts
- Girl Scouts
- Venture Scouts
- Outreach
- Live Animal Programs

Programming ideas that could be accommodated in a new building:

- Adult/Family Assembly
 - Book authors, speakers, photographers, artists, etc.
- Entire School Grade Groups
- Multiple Class Age Groups
- Weekend Larger/Smaller Groups Rentals
 - Weddings, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, family reunions, neighborhood meetings, graduation parties, etc.
- Weekday Larger/Smaller Groups Rentals
 - Corporate meetings/retreats, senior men’s/women’s groups, hiking groups, book clubs, parent/child groups, special interest groups, neighborhood meetings
- Professional staff trainings
 - Master naturalist trainings, SLP staff trainings, etc.
- Indoor Space for Halloween party activities (600+ participants/night)

Three multi-purpose rooms provide the following opportunities.

- Ability to expand programs and services in more appropriate spaces than present conditions allow.
- Able to accommodate over 100 participants at a time.
- Able to accommodate multiple school groups/school programs concurrently.
- Able to accommodate full day school programming including a lunch area.
- Able to offer other programs (adults, seniors, preschool) concurrently with school programming.
- Indoor rental opportunities for events – weddings, graduations, family gatherings, groups.
- Indoor space for holding Halloween party events/activities.
- Able to offer multiple camps/age groups during the same time.
- Quiet indoor space for meetings, reading & gathering independent of other groups.
- Separate public visitor space from program space.
- Ability to offer birthday parties, public programs and rental space at the same time during weekend hours.
- Live animal collections separate from rental spaces (no snakes in view of rental customers).
- Increased marketing of WHNC with a rental space.
- Increase adult programming by having a separate gathering space with amenities to attract/hold them there – i.e. fireplace, comfortable seating, library, quiet space, multi-purpose space.
- Increase senior programming – lectures, events, speakers.
- Increase summer camp offerings by having multiple classrooms and staff.
- Increase the number of young adults that can participate in the Jr. Naturalists program.
- Be able to offer large guest speaker programs with adequate gathering space.
- Be able to host meetings/workshops with professional organizations i.e. Minnesota Naturalists Association, MN Master Naturalists Program, etc.
- Host teacher workshops for area schools.

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

Program and facility survey for participants of the following events

- October 16 & 17, 2015: Halloween Party (Westwood Hills Nature Center)
 - Approximately 200 participated in the survey
- October 20 & 21, 2017: Halloween Party (Westwood Hills Nature Center)
 - Distributed informational flyer and conducted a survey (please see attached flyer)
- October 23, 2015: Halloween Party (The Rec Center)
 - Information on public meetings distributed
- October 27, 2017: Halloween Party (The Rec Center)
 - Distributed informational flyer and conducted a survey (please see attached flyer)

On-line survey

- 35 on-line surveys were completed for the master plan

Public Input Meetings (Westwood Hills Nature Center)

- October 27, 2015, 6 – 8 p.m.
 - 20 attendees at meeting

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

Public Presentations

- Senior Men’s Group at Lenox on October 24, 2017
 - 35 attendees

Citizen input played a key role in shaping this plan. This helped the architects understand the first-hand issues with the current facility. Meetings were publicized via postcards mailed to residents, the city’s website and social media, informing the School District, an email to past program users and promoting the meeting on Park TV.

As the project moves forward a detailed communication plan will be implemented that addresses strategies and tactics for reaching stakeholder groups, including Westwood Hills users, adjacent neighborhood residents, St. Louis Park residents, school groups, Westwood Hills staff and volunteers, city staff and more. The communication plan is designed to raise awareness, obtain input, educate and build support regarding the Interpretive Center project. The plan will employ a wide variety of tactics, each tailored to the specific public, along with a detailed timeline for deploying information to start first quarter 2018. Examples include:

- Community Education Advisory Council
 - February 13, 2018, 7 – 9 p.m.
- Presentation to Rotary groups, Business Council etc
- Information available at Neighborhood Leaders’ forum (January)
- Presentations at neighborhood meetings
- Public Open Houses at Westwood Hills Nature Center
- Use of social media
- Continual project updates on the city’s website at www.stlouispark.org/WHNC/new-interpretive-center.

RACE AND EQUITY LENS: The Race and Equity Toolkit was used by the Westwood Hills staff last fall into early December as a part of planning for the building. The following were the findings of this exercise where staff identified the impacts of building a new Interpretive Center Building thru the lens of racial equity

Desired Outcomes & Results:

- Way finding – Clarity of building location and a more welcoming atmosphere for everyone
- Easier to find location – more likely for someone new to WHNC to visit building
- Physically decreasing distance to building – youth, elderly, disabilities, etc.
- Providing restroom facilities after hours year round as well as informational brochures, drinking water, etc.
- More welcoming spaces for non-program visitors without the conflict of space, noise, etc.
- To be a community asset for the entire community to enjoy
- Location of new building will appear safer – see building from parking lot, staff can see parking lot

Ability to affect:

- Children/youth
- Environment
- Health
- Community engagement
- Jobs
- Education
- Government practices
- Parks and recreation

How this project impacts racial equity:

- Creating a no cost space for anyone to gather both inside and outside year-round
- Increase awareness of Nature Center and its programming and services through increased outreach programming in SLP as well as to develop relationships with underserved populations
- Continue offering free programs each season
- Sliding scale or family rate for program fees for multiple family members
- Strengthen connections to schools & community education
- Create new programming opportunities with schools for topics related to Zero Energy, sustainability, and resiliency
- Offer location for larger family units/groups to gather for events, rentals, etc.

ADDITIONAL WORK IN PROGRESS: Split Rock Studios has been chosen to design the interpretive exhibits with the intent to integrate the building, site and exhibit design to support the nature center's educational programming. Designing the exhibits appropriately is important as we consider working towards zero energy since exhibits can be one of the largest energy users in a building.

Staff has also been working with consultants to complete the following:

- Wetland delineation
- Site survey
- Trees located within survey area
- All utilities located
- The proposed new building site has been staked

SUSTAINABILITY GOAL: As a firm, HGA brings a wealth of knowledge in the area of sustainable design. HGA has also brought on consultant Chris Piche from Integral Group. Chris brings a broad understanding of high performance building engineering systems to this project. His approach is rooted in the philosophy that environmentally responsible design must constantly evolve to suit the technology available in balance with the project. To that end, the design of this building currently includes sustainable design that integrates HVAC, plumbing, solar, and a number of other elements to achieve Zero Energy status. Zero Energy buildings are highly energy efficient buildings in which the total consumption of energy from all sources is balanced by onsite renewable energy generation on an annual basis. The Zero Energy Building Certification (ZE) is a newly available certification (as of March 2017), and builds on years of leadership towards zero energy building design from both the International Living Future's Institute (ILFI) and the New Building Institute (NBI). ILFI is the organization behind the Living Building Challenge –which is arguably the most progressive green building certification available for buildings today. The New

Building's Institute has been a third-party auditor and verifier for zero energy buildings since 2009 and is also responsible for establishing an industry-wide definition for Zero Energy buildings, as well as documenting these projects through the Zero Energy Database.

As we move on to the next phase of Design Development, staff will work with the consultants to provide information regarding the return on investment for making this a Zero Energy building.

Zero Energy buildings are among the most progressive sustainable design projects in the world today. Due to the new and innovative nature of this goal, St. Louis Park has the opportunity to create a project which is among the first (or perhaps be the first) non-residential Zero Energy Project in Minnesota. This project would be leading the way for future sustainable design work in our cold-climate region.

NEXT STEPS: The project is in the design development phase. Staff will check in with the City Council midway through this phase and affirm direction in order to keep the project moving forward. What follows is an estimated schedule for the project:

1. Late January 2018 and on-going - public process and information sharing
2. Spring 2018: Design Development completed; move into preparation of construction documents
3. Early Fall of 2018: Construction Documents are finished and bids let
4. 2019: Construction begins
5. 2020: Finished project

REVISED PLAN - 1/3/2018

REDUCTION OPTION 2:
REDUCE RAPTOR AREA +
REDUCE MP RM A +
INCREASE PUBLIC SPACE

ASSUME -2800gsf REDUCTION

