

January 11, 2006

Fort Custer Recreation Area Public Input Meeting General Management Plan

(Notes taken by Claire Drolshagen and edited by Joe Strach)

On Wednesday, January 11, 2006, a public input and information meeting was held at Augusta Middle School. The purpose of the meeting was to share with attendee's information on the 'Management Planning' process in general, and its application for Fort Custer RA specifically. A key element of that planning process is to gather public input on what the park users feel are important considerations for natural and historic/cultural resource values, education and recreation opportunities, management focus, visitor experience, and development needs.

The meeting was moderated by Joe Strach, the District Planner for DNR-Parks and Recreation Division, with the assistance from other DNR staff. Public attendance at the meeting was estimated at 80.

General: After introductions of the internal planning team (persons that were present at the meeting), a PowerPoint presentation was made and the following items were explained:

- Introduction and planning process overview – discussion of where we are at and where we are going.
- Importance of filling out the 'Comment Form'.
- Purpose of the meeting – to describe the process and most importantly, to gather input.
- Why is the DNR doing this?
 - More efficient and effective management of our parks and park system.
 - Establish Purpose and Significance statements for the park (establish an 'identity' for the park).
 - Establish Management Zones to guide future planning and management decisions.
- Description of the informational tools that the DNR utilizes in this planning process (GIS) and the input gained from other DNR program staff.
- Zone descriptions and examples of them.
- "Draft" Purpose and Significance Statements for public review and comment – DNR is looking to incorporate the public stakeholder's voice or opinion into the Management Plan.
- Overview of natural and historic/cultural resources, and recreational and educational opportunities that occur at Fort Custer.

- Review the “Draft” Zone Map that was developed...looking for input from the meeting stakeholders.
- Internet posting on website for 30 days to solicit additional comments @ www.michigan.gov/parkmanagementplans

Public Questions/ Comments: After the presentation, the meeting was opened up for discussion. The following are the main points presented:

- Is snowmobiling allowed anywhere in the park or just the road shoulders?

Our current DNR policy states that snowmobiles may ride in all areas of the park as long as a minimum 4” snow base exists. It was recognized that Fort Custer provides good opportunities for beginner level riding and local riding. It was also recognized that Fort Custer has high value natural resource areas and some areas of the park are not conducive/safe to ride. At this current time in the management planning process, the DNR is proposing to have either designated snowmobile trails or designated areas to snowmobile.

- Is there a high volume of car traffic in the winter time and are the roads plowed in the winter time?

The park is plowed in the winter time to allow for vehicular traffic. The park is very busy in the winter time due to hunting, biking, horseback riding, cross country skiing, and other wintertime activities.

- Is any revenue generated from snowmobiles using the park?

All snowmobiles need a registration and trail permit. Our conservation officers police the park to verify all snowmobiles are in compliance. If a snowmobile is brought into the park by a trailer, they must have a motor vehicle permit.

An issue was raised regarding deer hunting and biking. One comment was to ban biking on the trails during the deer hunting season because the biking adversely affected the hunting opportunities. Another comment talked about the herds of deer that used to exist in the 1950’s and that high of deer population does not exist today.

A comment was made that bicyclists are good for deer hunting because they move the deer around and provide better hunting opportunities. Several other comments revolved about the park being a multi-use park and that every park user has a responsibility to act in a sportsmanlike manner, whether they are hunting, biking, horse riding, walking, etc.

A participant thanked the mountain biking group (MMBA) for maintaining the trails.

A comment was made regarding snowmobiling. Snowmobilers are good stewards of the land and snowmobiling does not adversely affect wildlife. This participant stated that he sees a good deal of wildlife while snowmobiling. Good snowmobile/trail design would include long trail loops and minimize straight-aways. Good trails markers are also important for keeping people on the trails.

A participant stated that the lakes within the park were dammed in the 1970's. In addition, there were larger deer populations back in the 1960's. At Fort Custer, there are greater 'human population' pressures nowadays that move the deer and in effect, reduce the deer population. Pressures on the deer herds are a statewide issue. Since he has been involved with Fort Custer, this plan is the fifth plan he has seen. Lastly, he stated that snowmobiles and restrictions are always changing over time.

The DNR emphasized that once the management planning process has been completed, the management plan will be reviewed each year and updated as needed. In other words, the management planning process has the ability to change/ be revised as needed.

Snowmobiles, hiking and dog mushing are not compatible. Multi-use trails do not work. This was countered by the opinion that they do work with proper signage and education.

A representative from a remote control airplane group explained that their group used to operate out of River Oaks County Park, but they are no longer able to fly at this location. Their group would like to fly at Fort Custer. This sport is family orientated and meets the AMA safety code. They have given a proposal to the park staff.

A dog sledder representative stated that their group would like a speed limit on the trails but does believe the snowmobiles put down nice tracks. This person stated that the only bother is when snowmobiles come around corners at high speeds.

Four inch depth snow is not an adequate depth to protect vegetation from snowmobiling. A question was asked if this DNR policy could be reviewed again.

A participant stated that it was his understanding that in the U.P. the dog sledders placed cones for trail designation. They do not want dog sledders and snowmobiles using the same trails due to incompatibility of usage.

A participant stated that it is each person's responsibility to wear appropriate clothing (hunter's orange) during hunting season to protect against injury.

- When are new trails going to be constructed?

DNR explained that the trail moratorium exists at each park until a management plan is completed. Once completed, then new trails can be planned (if appropriate) at that park. Therefore, we are waiting until the management plan is completed at Fort Custer before any new trail proposals can be reviewed.

- Do coyotes exist at the park?

The answer is yes. The participant responded that the coyotes are killing the fawns in the spring and effecting the deer population.

- Why can't Fort Custer RA have separate trails similar to Yankee Springs RA?

Yankee Springs has natural divisions/ different sections within the park, which allow for separate trails in each of the sections. It was also noted that the Friends Group at Fort Custer works together to accomplish shared goals.

- Will there be an equestrian campground?

Long range goals for the park will be established in phase two of the management planning process. So the feasibility of an equestrian campground will be addressed in phase two.

Toni Thompson took some time to discuss the activities of the Friends of Kalamazoo River Valley Trailway. In 1996, a master plan was developed for a linear trail from Battle Creek to the Kal Haven Trail. MDOT has given a grant for a non-motorized trail route. Part of the plan is to connect to Fort Custer from the east, go through the park and exit the park in the southwest corner. It was noted that hiking and biking promotes tourism and creates revenue for local businesses. Greenways also are valuable in allowing people to travel without using vehicles.

- When will the management plan be completed?

It is estimated that the plan will be completed and approved in five to six months. Once phase one is complete, then we can proceed to phase two and establish long range action goals for the park.

A statement was made regarding the need for an overnight equestrian camp. Additional parking is needed and should include large turning radius for maneuvering horse trailers.

A dog musher representative stated that he did not want the zones so restrictive that they would not be able to groom their trails. The trail grooming keeps the trails safe for dog sledding.

- The southwest corner of the park is used for model rocket flying. Will the backcountry zone classification restrict the model rocket flying??

The backcountry zone allows for low density usage. So retrieving model rockets could be permissible.

- Is there any plan at the park to combat garlic mustard?

Garlic mustard is a difficult exotic plant to exterminate. Biological controls are currently being studied. The goal is to keep it out of high quality resource areas.

Black Locust trees contain sensitive species. It was stated that when the DNR eliminates black locust stands in efforts to improve the natural resources that they also consider the sensitive species that reside in the trees.

- What is being done to open up the impact zones that are currently fenced off?

The DNR, DEQ, and Department of Defense are currently working together to have these impact zones swept and cleared of ordnance. The public was encouraged to contact your local representative to have the 'no entry' areas swept and cleared of ordnance. The Department of Defense has a long list of work and a little 'political' encouragement may help Fort Custer be a higher priority.

- What will be different from the current usage at the park to when the new management plan is implemented?

At phase two, we will be looking at the natural resources and how the current development fits. Changes could occur if we find out that the current development is not appropriate for the zone designation. For example, if development occurs in an environmental sensitive zone or primitive zone.

Fort Custer is located near a national cemetery. Any possible noisy activities within the park land would not be compatible with the cemetery.

- Has the Friends of Fort Custer been involved in the planning process?

The DNR had two meetings with the major stakeholders of the park - mountain bikers, equestrians and dog mushers. At the meetings, the

management planning process was presented and comment/input was gathered.

- Since the trails are multi-use, can the different trail users go in opposite/designated directions to avoid conflicts with other trail users? (For example, can bikers go one direction on a trail and equestrians go in the opposite direction so that they are meeting each other head on?)

The trails are currently set up so that the different trail users go in opposite directions. For example, equestrians would rather meet a biker head on so that they have time to prepare. This encounter is better than being passed in the same direction, which may startle the horse.

- Is there a way to encourage people to go the correct direction on the trails?

One solution is to make sure the trail signage is in place.

A dog sledder stated that sled dogs are difficult to steer at full speed and can also spook easily. He suggested that other trail user's yield and also stated that petting the dogs was not encouraged.

- How does a cross country skier with a dog pass a dog musher on the trail?

It was suggested that the trail user yell 'trail' so the dog musher is aware and that the dog is tightly leashed.

A comment was made that they liked the multi-use trails and it is up to each trail user to respect the other trail users. The trails are funded by lots of different people.

The following "Comments" are from the comments sheet that was handed out at the meeting:

- Allow geo-caching (compass and GPS unit) in the park.
- Provide an 'express' lane at the contact booth for yearly pass patrons.
- It would be nice to have 'ranger talks' on a regular basis to educate campers and park users on preserving the natural resources of the park/area.
- Do not allow biking or horseback riding from November 15-30th of each year.

- Fort Custer is a great resource. I have used the park for cross country skiing, hiking, bicycling, swimming, camping and horse back riding.