

MINUTES

Belle Isle Park Advisory Committee Meeting

Thursday, May 21, 2020
Location: Teleconference

Meeting called to order at 9:02 a.m.
A Quorum was established at 9:03 a.m.

EXCUSED ABSENCES

None reported

UNEXCUSED ABSENCES

Bryan Barnhill
Brad Dick

PRESENT FOR BIPAC

Chair, Michele Hodges
Michael Curis
Bud Denker
Sommer Woods
Lonnie Peek

DNR STAFF PRESENT

Ron Olson, Chief
Karis Floyd
Scott Pratt
Michael Terrell
Amanda Treadwell
Darlisa Rickman
Barbara Graves
Kimberley Hicks
Lt. Todd Szyska

OTHERS PRESENT

Lance Couturier, MSP
Bill Shreck, MDOT

REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of Minutes for April 16, 2020:
Moved by: Bud Denker
Seconded by: Michael Curis

Michele Hodges called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

GENERAL UPDATES

Ron Olson, Chief, DNR-PRD

The executive orders are evolving and slowly allowing more activities. Fortunately, they were granted an exception to the hiring freeze to bring some staff back and are hoping to get staff up to speed in the coming weeks. Playgrounds and game courts continue to be closed to adhere to social distancing requirements. The conservatory, aquarium and nature center remain closed. They are working with the health and management and budget departments to draft guidelines for a return to work plan for indoor facilities. All state park events have been suspended until at least July 1; the date could move again depending on the executive orders. State revenues and general fund still remain a challenge. It was projected at the revenue conference a few days ago a \$2.5B deficit between now and the end of September. Belle Isle is the only state park that is primarily funded with general fund money. They are expecting to receive some reductions that will take place and are not sure at this time how much it will affect operations.

Bud Denker asked, based on general fund and matching funds that are important to fund projects, if grants given for various projects are in jeopardy. **Chief Olson** said that all capital outlay projects have been paused, except for critical projects such as the coffer dam. Any of the grants, even philanthropic funding and matches, could be in jeopardy. The executive order has put a freeze on spending and hiring. Each project has to be run through an assessment process.

Rev. Lonnie Peek asked if Belle Isle will be open for the fireworks. **Chief Olson** said, from what he understands, the mayor has decided to move them back to August 31. He assumes by then people would be allowed to congregate to some extent and they would run the same routine that they have in the past but suspects social distancing will still have to be addressed.

Sommer Woods sent an e-mail about her concerns with the traffic pattern. Over the weekend there was still a lot of congestion and she understood that the Detroit Police were going to be involved. What is the plan? Is it for a certain time period? Will they be stationed every quarter mile? **Chief Olson** said the Michigan State Police have indicated they will assist, according to plan, but he will let law enforcement and staff address it.

Karis Floyd, Park Manager, Belle Isle and Milliken

There has been a tremendous increase in traffic on the island. They have met with the Michigan State Police (MSP), DNR conservation officers, Detroit Police (DPD) and park rangers to come up with a closure plan similar to last year. Closures will last a minimum of one hour, depending on crowds. The DNR will make the call for closures, and conservation officers will be in contact with MSP and DPD. Rangers will be strategically placed to keep the traffic flowing. There will also be messaging boards and traffic counts. **Scott Pratt** said they are working with DPD since they don't have jurisdiction of Jefferson. DPD is open to managing the traffic and they are happy DPD is at the table with them.

Lt. Todd Szyska, DNR Law

Parking spots have been impacted due to flooding, and they are not even at full capacity. Car counting is key and it will help with the flow of traffic. A plan is in place to manage volume, but they may have to close the park if the volume is too much. Law enforcement and staff communication will help with coordination. **Sommer Woods** said it is definitely helpful and she appreciates the conversation. She wants to make sure the count threshold is watched because her fear is over capacity.

Karis Floyd said that all closings and updates will be immediately broadcast on the DNR Facebook page, and he will also notify the Belle Isle Conservancy so they can post the information on their page as well.

Coffer 9 has been installed. Blue Herron was a challenge because of weather conditions, equipment and vessels. **Amanda Treadwell** is getting estimates from companies that have the equipment and manpower. Hopefully by the end of next week we will have those numbers and we can proceed. They expect to get preliminary estimates this week to move it forward.

The pumps are running daily due to the flooding. They have worked with the water department so sewage does not go into the river.

They are bringing on an additional three rangers and are approved to hire summer staff. Keep in mind that they are in a situation of temporary layoffs right now so everyone is working reduced hours until July 25. Most staff will only be able to work 32 hours per week.

Approval has been given for trash removal to restart. Staff have been removing trash, but there is some catch-up to do yet. They are still encouraging the carry-in, carry-out messaging until COVID 19 is solved in some way.

Amanda Treadwell, PRD Planner, Southeast Michigan - the culvert install at the Lake Okonoka project is on hold until water levels are lowered. Installation of stop log structures on the river side to compliment the dam. Work will have to be coordinated with coffer dam installation.

Chair Hodges asked for a statewide Army Corps update on water levels. **Scott Pratt** was told by the Army Corps that water levels have not even been breached and they could rise further.

Mike Terrell, Metro District Supervisor. Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) has nothing to report on the rising of the Detroit River. He met with them and the Great Lakes Water Authority yesterday. The nature center is surrounded by 8 inches of water in the parking lot. The Strand is flooding from behind the casino to Dossin. There are dire conditions on the island. The power station is 3 inches away from being under water. All three pumps are operational. He will assess to see what can be saved.

Karis Floyd - they have been in discussions on the fountain start-up plan and are figuring it will take about 3 weeks to get it running. They are looking at June 12 for a potential date. Progress will be updated on Facebook. Bud Denker said Michael Montri updated him on it and they are going to talk with Michele, Scott and Karis to see if they can assist with the cost.

Chair Hodges asked when they expect the Recreation Passport to be restored. **Scott Pratt** said as of right now, not until July.

Chair Hodges asked DNR staff to provide an update on the Trust Fund legislation. **Scott Pratt** said Chief Olson is still at the table to discuss projects and an update will be provided at the June meeting.

Karis Floyd said we have had an increase in graffiti, especially in the old zoo area and along Central Ave. Staff have been monitoring, along with COs, any illegal entries. Staff are being instructed to remove it immediately and they are trying their best to keep the park clean, within parameters. **Chair Hodges** said staff is working hard and to please keep safety in mind. It is important for the community to be patient and understanding. Also import is to promote the carry in, carry out message.

Belle Isle Conservancy Update

Chair Hodges acknowledged **Mr. Tom Wilson** who lost his battle with COVID-19 and offered condolences to his family. They were fortunate to have his service for many years.

The Conservancy will continue the Keep Belle Isle Beautiful campaign efforts. They are working on a reopening strategy for the aquarium to make sure visitors and staff are safe. The animals are being well cared for. There are a number of new exhibits being worked on at this time. There is concern about lost revenues. The Tip the Scales event details are on Facebook. It is important to have donation options so the facility gets the love and care it needs. Weekly they have included Facebook live events, many of which are aquarium specific. Examples are how to make your own aquarium and a bee craft.

Chair Hodges thanked the support from the Grand Prix. Despite not having events such as the Gala, they have received support from sponsors such as PWC, PNC, BCBS, among others. They are grateful for the leadership. As much as the DNR has outlined, they do have significant challenges ahead. They will put their leadership hats on and rally as a community. They are looking at reconfiguring some events such as the koi festival.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Tim Lachette, St. Clair - He was on the island last night and it's soggy. He is curious if the Grand Prix would hold the race on the island, even with the virus, without the flooding issues. Chair Hodges said they would normally defer these questions for after the meeting. Bud Denker said he does not know. They would have to look out for the safety of everyone. If it wasn't the virus, it would be ensuring security with water. From what he saw last night from the pictures, it would be difficult to do any event. Mr. Latchet said, with all due respect, he understands the value Penske has provided Belle Isle, but he is opposed to having the event on the island. He said a large portion of the season is disrupted by the event. He is pleading for them to find another venue.

Michael Betzold - For years at these meetings I have been arguing against your management priorities. Now there is no longer any debate. Nature has spoken. Today much of Belle Isle is underwater. Today the aquarium, conservatory, nature center, Dossin Museum, yacht club, and other facilities are closed. Yet the open outdoor spaces will be crowded with people desperate for a breath of fresh air. Two facts are beyond dispute: First, the pandemic has made Belle Isle more important than ever as a refuge for people desperate for a place to walk or just sit and look at the water. This is the one essential priceless aspect of this park that should not ever be taken away. Second, the real authority over Belle Isle is nature. No human effort can stop the Great Lakes water levels from rising or the east winds from blowing off Lake St. Clair. We can't know how long this pandemic will last nor when the next one will occur. We don't have a clue as to if and when the lakes' water level will go back down. Your committee must respect these two indisputable realities and strive to keep as much of Belle Isle accessible to the public as is possible year-round. It's no longer up for discussion: There can never be a car race held here again. That's not my view. It's what a power much greater than any of us has decided. Each of you, and Mr. Penske, cannot contest this any longer. End of discussion.

Email from **twegienek** - As a long-time fan of the Grand Prix, I am going to miss the race this year, but it was absolutely the right decision to cancel it. The flooding caused by regional high water levels made the pandemic a blessing in disguise. I am looking forward to next year's race and many more on the island. #TEAMPENSKE

Bud Denker offered assistance for helping sand bagging in the park. **Karis Floyd** said they are seeking volunteers for sandbagging and trash removal and any additional help would be appreciated. He will have Jacob reach out.

Rev. Peek said the times we are in now are more than challenging and allow you to exceed what you would normally do. He appreciates the help. This is a test of what we are going through. It gives us the ability to grow and test on how good we are and how productive we can be. He thinks it is a way to reach out to people emotionally and to understand that this too shall pass, and we should be a different person outside of this. Use this time of crisis to be productive and say what can I do?

Sommer Woods said she appreciates the call today and if she can be available for assistance, she will be there. She is there to make sure the community is protected but wants a balance.

Chair Hodges took a minute to salute **Brad Dick** for his leadership, who has been on the front lines to make sure the community is testing.

Chair Hodges recommended the Anna Scripps Whitcomb web page for inspiration. We are very fortunate the parks are serving an important role at this time and is encouraging the community to be patient and put in the effort to keeping the parks beautiful. This time needs to be seen as a catalyst to do better and come out of this strong and in a better position.

Motion to Adjourn:

Moved by: Lonnie Peek
Seconded by: Sommer Woods

Meeting concluded: 10:21 a.m.

NEXT REGULAR MEETING:

June 18, 2020

9:00 a.m.

Conference call/Teams

Approved: _____
Michele Hodges Ronald A. Olson, Chief

Date: _____