

# MINUTES

## Belle Isle Park Advisory Committee Meeting

Thursday, July 16, 2020  
Location: Teleconference

**Meeting called to order at 9:04 a.m.**  
A Quorum was established at 9:11 a.m.

### **EXCUSED ABSENCES**

None reported

### **UNEXCUSED ABSENCES**

Bryan Barnhill  
Sommer Woods  
Lonnie Peek

### **PRESENT FOR BIPAC**

Chair, Michele Hodges  
Michael Curis  
Bud Denker  
Brad Dick

### **DNR STAFF PRESENT**

Ron Olson, Chief  
Karis Floyd  
Scott Pratt  
Michael Terrell  
Darlisa Rickman  
Barbara Graves  
Lt. Todd Szyska  
Mia Moore

### **OTHERS PRESENT**

Harold Inman, MDOT  
Olukayode Adefeso, MDOT  
Bill Shreck, MDOT  
Lance Couturier, MSP

## **REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

### **Approval of Minutes for June 18, 2020:**

Moved by: Michael Curis

Seconded by: Bud Denker

**Michele Hodges** called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

## **GENERAL UPDATES**

### **Ron Olson**, Chief, DNR-PRD

The updated executive orders require the use of masks in indoor public spaces. There has been no advancement for the opening of events and they have been extended to the middle of August. Events are limited to 100 in the lower part of the state and 250 in the upper. Events over 100 have been cancelled or postponed. Camping operations were opened on June 22. Each day use area, particularly on Belle Isle, has seen an extreme escalated number of visitors, the most they have seen in several years. The hot weather has drawn a lot of people to the areas with water. With this brought challenges with litter and refuse being deposited in places where they should not have been. Staff have tried their best to provide large numbers of trash cans and have been trying to push visitors to care for the parks. Staffing has been strained across the state because of the challenges of hiring summer workers. Staff is doing their best to make sure the parks stay beautiful in this stressful and difficult time, with some help from some wonderful volunteer groups.

### **Karis Floyd**, Park Manager, Belle Isle and Milliken

The culvert repair at Lake Okonoka is in process. Cannot proceed until the coffer dam is in and paving is done. After this is finished then the Strand will be open. The dam contractor will begin within the next few weeks. Hiring has been difficult; they have had over 100 applications, but they have run into the problem of individuals wanting to stay on unemployment. They have about 17 people on board, when typically they have 28. They are in the process of sorting through 103 applications for the two ranger positions. The park has been experiencing extremely large crowds. With this they are seeing a lot of drinking and trash. Messaging has been posted telling people where to put trash, where recycling containers are located, and to take care of the park and all the work that has been done in the last five years. They do not want to see the park go back to where it once was. Staff is doing the best they can to keep up, but it is a challenge. They are using Facebook to update on anything that is going on in the park. The band shell assessment has begun; the 27<sup>th</sup> will be the first day for assessment. They will not have any programming this summer due to COVID-19, which includes the Stepping Stones and Outdoor Explorer programs.

### **Harold Inman**, Transportation Maintenance Coordinator, MDOT

The main issue for the road problems is the flooding. Once flooding is under control, they can do permanent restoration. The temporary solutions, installing aggregate in the potholes, has been unsuccessful. The deterioration at this point is too far gone to do anything until flooding is under control. About 600 feet of Oakway is under water. They can bring some aggregate in along with drainage culverts and build a temporary road, but by the time it's done, the dam would be

installed. The other last possibility is to convert Riverbank to a two-way between Vista and the Yacht Club.

**Chair Hodges** is concerned about the partners on the island who have felt the impacts in terms of maintaining viability of their entities. We need a “plan B” to provide infrastructure to them to allow them to thrive. There have been a number of partners who have made comments on the situation. A well-received solution was routing traffic to two-way on Riverbank Dr. How can we ensure we get people to our key assets, such as the Nature Center and the Yacht Club?

**Harold Inman** said they can convert Riverbank to two-way to ensure partners have access to those facilities, but they would have to get input from the rangers who are out there during the peak hours. A temporary solution in the past has not gone well due to a lack of a plan between them and PRD. **Scott Pratt** will take the lead on this. His contact e-mail is [pratts@michigan.gov](mailto:pratts@michigan.gov).

**Scott Pratt** added that he and **Karis** have been working on this situation and it has been trial and error. Whenever they find a fix, they try to do it as quickly as possible, but with the flooding it has been difficult. With the two-way on Riverbank, it became somewhat of a cluster with people trying to get to the beach. That is why this plan with MDOT will be a final step. They have been in contact with stakeholders and will stay on top of it.

**Chair Hodges** said the Conservancy will be more intentional in initiating contact with island stakeholders and improving communication so they can quickly come up with solutions to problems, such as the power outage situation. **Karis Floyd** added that when the power outages happen it is not communicated to him through DTE or public lighting which has been an ongoing problem. When they close the park, especially with the DYC, they will have them line up on the boulevard so it is easier for the officers to bring them in.

**Mike Terrell**, Metro District Supervisor, PRD

Mike said all waterways continue to rise. Once the coffer dam is installed, it will stop the water in some of the inland areas, but it may cause problems in other areas. The dam is one step, but water will rise in the lagoon. The Army Corps, Coast Guard, MDOT, MSP and City of Detroit are all at the table.

**Karis Floyd** reported that there have been 200 trash cans placed around the island in addition to the recycle bins and dumpsters. Chair Hodges would like to initiate volunteers to help with trash removal.

**Chair Hodges** said she received feedback from the community that increased messaging and signage on the Passport requirement would be helpful. She asked about the reopening strategies for the Nature Center, Dossin and concessionaires. She received feedback on the golf facility and its condition. **Chief Olson** said they do not have the authority to reopen indoor facilities at this time because they have to meet the state COVID requirements. Concessionaires can resume activities because they are outdoor oriented, as long as they follow the safety protocols. The golf course has not been taken care of sufficiently. High water has also been part of the problem. Discussion is taking place on whether or not the contractor will be able to continue to run the facility.

**Chair Hodges** asked about the master plan and that if the band shell project is underway, what is the status of other projects. **Chief Olson** said we are only allowed to put forward critical projects. If funded by federal or other designated sources, they can move along, but those that are not critical have been paused. Particularly areas that are funded with general tax funds are being scrutinized much more carefully due to the challenges to the general fund. This is an issue statewide, not just with Belle Isle. **Amanda Treadwell** can create a list of what is moving along and what is paused. **Karis** said the band shell and sawmill are with private dollars and have been approved to move forward.

**Darlisa Rickman** said the Arbor Tree Climb event has been moved to a different region due to COVID restrictions in the Detroit region.

**Scott Pratt** said Remembrance Day is being moved to August 31. He is working with MSP on logistics and will report next month on details.

#### **Lt. Todd Szyska, DNR Law**

They have seen more crowds in the park than they have ever seen. With the increase in crowds, they have seen an increase with trash and alcohol use. The park was asked to put up signs and a no alcohol message on the message board. There has been some people throwing trash out of their car windows and several minor fender benders. There has been a lot of ground fires because of individuals putting hot coals in trash receptacles. They have also had an outcropping of ORVs coming in from the city which are not allowed on the roads. Speed has also been an issue with the average speed of those vehicles that were stopped by DNR/MSP for speeding being 20 MPH over the speed limit. They are enhancing enforcement. Defiance to law enforcement has taken place, as is happening around the U.S. right now. He appreciates the team getting MDOT involved and coming to a resolution on the roadway problems. They are trying to hold the line and keep the island in nice shape. **Scott Pratt** said the marketing campaign will be ramped up, similar to what they did when the island first transitioned to Parks, with messaging on where to dispose of trash, hot coals, etc.

#### **Belle Isle Conservancy Update**

This week is the virtual version of the Koi Festival that usually takes place in May, which involves moving the koi from the pond to the aquarium. They are pivoting many of their fundraising events to virtual, including Polish the Jewel. All of the volunteer efforts are being done in compliance with the DNR and CDC guidelines to ensure safety. She thanks the community for coming out and pulling out tons of trash. They are looking at replacing all of the funds that have been lost during this time. They have another sponsor of the Grand Prixmiere, Huntington Bank, who has agreed to commit its sponsorship dollars even though the event is not taking place. Blue Cross/Blue Shield has kept their fundraising dollars at the table as well. They will be hosting senior citizens and immuno-compromised hours at the aquarium when it is allowed to open, sponsored by Blue Cross/Blue Shield. PNC is sponsoring some of the Creative Corner programming, which takes place on Facebook every Wednesday. They are convening stakeholder meetings, focusing on island tenants. The first one is July 22 with additional

meetings on September 23 and December 3. She offered sympathies to Brad and the City of Detroit team for the loss of DeAndree Watson who passed away.

### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

**Gordon Didier** – My wife Elaine and I have been coming to Belle Isle since we were young people in the 1950s and 60s. For the past 41 years we have been members of the Detroit Yacht Club. I currently serve as chairman of the board of directors. Since he became treasurer 5 ½ years ago, and Rick Price, our general manager who is also on this call, assumed that role, we have made enormous progress implementing sound business and financial management and restoring fiscal and financial integrity for the DYC. The Coronavirus has had a severe impact on all of us. Every business, every non-profit, including the DYC, are using up large amounts of cash from our reserves just to sustain the club operations. On top of that, the almost impassable condition of the roads to reach the club has created another crisis. All of you know that there have been repeated and ongoing damage to vehicles trying to reach the east end of the island. Our staff members incur damage to their cars every day just getting to work to earn their livelihood. Our members, already deterred by the Coronavirus, are now unable to reach the club in ordinary vehicles; vendors and contractors are also affected. We cannot operate a multi-million-dollar business and the largest (93,000 sq ft) yacht club facility in the world with this kind of lack of access. This is a 150-year-old institution which is part of the fabric of our community and it is essential that we do everything that we can to help it survive. Mr. Inman has made it clear that there is no short-term solution to pair the roads through the woods. The only answer now is to reroute Riverbank Road for two-way traffic. It has been done on rare occasions but then the cones have been moved. In my view it is essential this be addressed today if possible. It happens that we have 30 new applicants for membership coming to the yacht club per reception this evening. If those people are unable to access the club, they may not return. We have already lost a number of members due to the Coronavirus, as you can imagine. If we lose these applicants, it will have a very devastating impact on the Detroit Yacht Club. I beg you, sincerely, to coordinate your activities among the MDNR, MDOT, and MSP to implement this solution today. You have the cones in place, you have the opportunity to make it happen. I urge you, I beg you, to please make something happen and allow us to have reasonable access to the Detroit Yacht Club. Thank you very much for your consideration.

**Amy Greene**, Director of Belle Isle Nature Center – Thanks everyone today for their time and for being generous with communication advocacy for the attention to the health and everything on the island, in particular the roads. They have multiple plans in draft form waiting to present where safety is paramount; either outdoor, indoor, or both in terms of programming and strict capacity limits. Once it is clear she will share it. In the meantime, they have staff there seven days a week, herself or the manager, to oversee operations or issues with the facility. They also have zookeepers there seven days a week and custodians and contractors, so attention to the roads is super important to them. There are so many people coming to the island more than ever and it gives them the opportunity to help shape how people are interacting with the island, with the diversity, the biodiversity with the wildlife, with the urban nature. They are part of a bio-blight with Michigan State University and 11 organizations around the state for the rest of the month. All you need is a smart phone, an app called I Naturalists, take a picture, and you'll contribute to community science and citizen scientists who are trying to understand what is going

on around the state in the summer. If anybody is interested in that check out the Belle Isle Nature Center Facebook page. They also have a lot of virtual programming they have shared as well, to help people who may be interested in the island better understand how to care for the things that live in our backyards. They are there, just not open to the public yet. They will keep everyone informed. She thanked everyone for their attention to the concerns.

**Randall Cain** – He was on the island last Tuesday and he was both shocked and saddened by the terrible condition and the litter throughout the area that is open. He is encouraged by what he heard today and encouraged by a call he received from Scott Pratt. As long as the attention is kept on eliminating this trash problem or at least doing the best possible, then life is good. He thanks everyone for their efforts.

Via e-mail from **Angela Gabridge** - Dear Committee: I am reaching out with concerns regarding access to the Detroit Yacht Club and other facilities on Belle Isle when the island is closed to other vehicular traffic due to crowding. I understand and respect the need to control traffic flow and volume on the island, pandemic or not, so thank you for your attention and diligence. It is my understanding that, in years past, if the island needed to be closed, club members and guests were still allowed access provided they went directly to the yacht club and did not further contribute to the traffic crowding, etc. I would imagine this would have had to have been the case for private events at the Dossin, conservatory, etc. as well. I am curious what has changed for this year, particularly now that the executive orders have relaxed.

Many times, we have been denied access to the island or had guests denied access. While this is certainly an annoyance, my bigger concern is for long term financial sustainability of the club and other institutions and businesses in a year in which they have already been hit hard by millions in lost revenue not just from general operations, but from lost event revenue as weddings, fundraisers and other events needed to cancel due to the pandemic. Now as executive orders are lifted and safe gatherings of certain sized are allowed to continue, people are reluctant to book events at these venues as they nor their guests can be guaranteed access.

We have big issues- managing flooding and nature conservation, sanitation, public safety, the pandemic, etc. I get it, and am grateful to this committee, the state and city police and the DNR for their attention to all of these issues and more. I do worry about the long term viability of the institutions on the island however- the aquarium, conservatory, Nature Zoo, Dossin Museum, kayak rental, Boat Club and Yacht Club if patrons and event guests cannot access them and support them with much needed revenue, particularly at a time when philanthropic support is also in danger.

Anyone who spends time here knows all of these institutions and businesses are patronized by the most diverse crowds you'll see in the region. They are important not only to the fabric and viability of the island, but to the region. Is there anything we can do to improve access while also growing revenue; for example, those purchasing a special pass in addition to the recreation passport? An access fee could be built into events booked at island venues to offset the cost of monitoring that extra traffic onto the island, etc.? Certainly, the businesses located on the island are willing to be innovative if provided the opportunity to cooperate and collaborate on solutions that work for everyone.

Thanks so much for all this body does and thank you for your consideration on all of this as well.

E-mail from **S. Stanley** - The Grand Prix will be missed, but it was the right decision. Looking forward to next year's race and many more on the island.

Meeting concluded: 10:33 a.m.

**NEXT REGULAR MEETING:  
August 20, 2020**

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
Michele Hodges Ronald A. Olson, Chief

Date: \_\_\_\_\_