



*Working to protect the Mississippi River
and its watershed in the Twin Cities area.*

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November 16, 2021

Dear Commissioners:

We are writing to share our assessment of the recent Natural Resources Report conducted at the county's two Maplewood land parcels being considered for redevelopment (the Parcel A grasslands and the Parcel B Ponds at Battle Creek golf course).

We greatly appreciate the county's careful attention to the ecological concerns at these properties. Thank you for ensuring that this report was completed before any decisions about the properties' futures are made. We hope that this kind of assessment will become a standard Ramsey County process for other properties that might possess notable natural value, including Boys Totem Town.

Friends of the Mississippi River ecologists have carefully reviewed the report conducted by Midwest Natural Resources (MNR). Given the endangered and threatened species identified at both properties, we ask you to conduct further assessment of these species' habitat needs before proceeding with any development planning. We believe that the Parcel A grasslands, in particular, will likely need to be left entirely undeveloped in order to preserve any habitat benefit for the birds dependent on it.

Parcel A grasslands

The MNR report confirms that the Parcel A grasslands are "ideal habitat for bird species" and home to the endangered Henslow's sparrow as well as seven additional bird Species in Greatest Conservation Need. These birds' serious population declines are well-documented: The grasshopper sparrow population in Minnesota has plummeted 97 percent since 1966. The endangered Henslow's sparrow population has declined 67 percent in that same time. Other birds' declines are similarly dramatic.

These population collapses have been connected to habitat loss. Minnesota has lost 98 percent of the grassland habitat that existed before European colonization. One scientist recently told the Star Tribune that grasslands like these are "the least protected and most at-risk biome on the planet."

The science is clear that many of the rare and vulnerable birds who rely on grasslands are very sensitive to habitat "patch size." Smaller areas simply don't provide what these species are looking for. Three of the species present on the Parcel A grassland have been found to need habitat areas of 74+ contiguous acres for reproductive success.

On the surface, there might be appeal in a "compromise" scenario in which the 77-acre grassland is partially developed and partially preserved. But this may not be possible. Reducing the size of the grassland habitat could completely eliminate its habitat functions for these rare birds.

We encourage you to conduct a more detailed analysis of this property and the birds' habitat needs before the county makes any decisions about development. It's quite likely that preserving the entire property as an addition to Battle Creek Regional Park is the only way to ensure that it remains a home for birds who don't have another suitable place to nest.

Parcel B golf course

There are confirmed sightings of the federally endangered rusty-patched bumble bee at the Ponds at Battle Creek golf course. Two bird Species in Greatest Conservation Need were also found at the golf course.

This opens similar questions about the future of the golf course. Development would likely disturb bee colonies and hibernation areas and limit usable habitat.

Golf courses provide mixed habitat outcomes. While the green space and plantings can be home to a variety of animals, the pesticides often used for management, the monocultural turfgrass present across much of the course, and the high level of human activity limit benefits.

As with the grasslands, we urge further study of the golf course's current inhabitants and their habitat needs before any redevelopment decisions are made.

Wildlife habitat has human benefits

It's been suggested to us that preserving the 77-acre Parcel A grassland as open space is harmful to Ramsey County residents in need of the affordable housing the county would like to build on this site. Indeed, we are in a very serious housing crisis that demands a response.

But to portray our considered case for conservation as "people versus birds" is reductionist. We're all part of the same complex ecosystem. Humans are dependent on our plant and animal relatives to help keep our air and water clean, to pollinate the plants we eat and sustain the planet that sustains us.

We simply don't know enough to decide that the Henslow's sparrow or rusty-patched bumblebee aren't important to human survival. Sometimes we don't fully understand the consequences of extinction until it's too late. Our community is already in the midst of an environmental catastrophe and we must respond to the science that can help us stave off even worse impacts.

Fortunately, this doesn't have to be a zero-sum situation. With your leadership, the county can pursue other solutions to add density and create affordable housing without destroying a rare habitat that's home to endangered and threatened species.

We urge you to conduct further analysis of these two parcels and their inhabitants' habitat needs before proceeding with any decisions. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

For the river,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colleen O'Connor Toberman". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a light blue rectangular highlight.

Colleen O'Connor Toberman
River Corridor Director

cc:

Mayor Marylee Abrams
Jean Krueger