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Revitalize Cobbs Hill Park for a More Vital Rochester

The line of hills between Highland Park and Winton Road, of which Pinnacle Hill and Cobbs Hill are the highest knobs, should be controlled by the city and used for park purposes. Nowhere in the near vicinity of the city are there any heights from which so extended and impressive an outlook can be had.

Andrew W. Brunner
Frederick Law Olmsted [jr]
Feb 10, 1911

Coalition for Cobbs Hill
May 2019

(Core Coalition member organizations are: ABC Streets Neighborhood Association, Cobbs Hill Village Tenants' Association, Friends of Washington Grove, Nunda Boulevard Association, Sierra Club Rochester Region, & Upper Monroe Neighborhood Association.)

Introduction

Cobbs Hill Park, the only major park still under city control (Bayer Associates, 2009.), like other parks in the City of Rochester, are extensively used by residents from all over the city and surrounding suburbs. It suffers from a lack attention and the lack of an articulated vision for its future. The park is under attack and will degrade if not better attended to. Elements such as the planned Cobbs Hill Village multi-story buildings, the 2018 dog park and planned exercise facilities are being added in the absence of a master plan. Planning options continually be further constrained as time goes by, and the parks quality and positive impact will diminish. Cobbs Hill Park can, on the other hand, play a significant role in making Rochester serving our entire population and being attracting residents to our city. The Coalition for Cobbs Hill Park proposes a master plan for Cobbs Hill Park and a long-term strategy for its implementation, one that addresses the needs and hopes of its growing numbers of users. In the following we:

1. Provide an historical background;
2. Propose the foundation of a vision for Cobbs Hill Park;
3. Recommend elements of a request for proposals for a master plan; and
4. Offer to work with the City of Rochester to achieve this outcome.

We intend this document to be the basis of discussion that includes City of Rochester staff and leaders and extends to the community as a whole.

Background

Cobbs Hill is one part of a meandering ridge, a recessional moraine that continues west into Pinnacle Hill, the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Highland Park and Mt. Hope Cemetery. The moraine formed at the boundary of the great ice sheet that covered the area as it paused for a period of time before receding farther north. Sediments deposited on and around Cobb's Hill are mostly sands and gravel. These sandy soils often are nutrient-poor because they are porous. Water percolates rapidly through them, leaching minerals. They are also fragile and are easily eroded during heavy rains, snow melt or through heavy use when unprotected by vegetation. Their fragility and importance to Rochester has long been recognized, and in 1968 the entire area, covering all and extending beyond the current park,

was registered by the City of Rochester as a critical environmental area¹. (See map at Appendix I.)

What we now know as Cobbs Hill Park appears to have been initiated in 1904 by the purchase of the top of Cobbs Hill, a prominence beside what had been a quarry, for use as a second city water reservoir (O'Donnell & Wilson, 1994.). It is named after Edna Cobb, who had previously owned the land. In 1905 or 1908 (documents vary as to the date), George Eastman donated an additional 15 acres of land. His donation came with the caveat that the City of Rochester acquire the adjoining Eastern Widewaters tract that had once been part of the Erie Canal. Public donations (\$35,625.00), the City of Rochester (\$5,625.00), and other donations of small parcels of land combined to make up the current total of 61.5 acres for reservoir and park. (A map showing these parcels is at Appendix II.) We note that both private donations and public acquisition of the parcels was made with the implicit or explicit assumption that it would be for the park. The following are examples from Rochester City Council minutes from the period:

On behalf of the City, and the public at large, the Common Council does hereby express to Mr. George Eastman its appreciation at his generosity and public spirit in donating this park to the City of Rochester (Tuesday, May 25, 1909.)

Section 1. The Common Council hereby determines its intention to acquire the following described real estate, which it deems necessary for municipal purposes, to wit: . . .

Section 3. Said real estate when acquired shall be and become part of the Park System of the City of Rochester, to be used in connection with Cobbs Hill

¹ To be designated as a CEA, an area must have an exceptional or unique character with respect to one or more of the following:

- a benefit or threat to human health;
- a natural setting (e.g., fish and wildlife habitat, forest and vegetation, open space and areas of important aesthetic or scenic quality);
- agricultural, social, cultural, historic, archaeological, recreational, or educational values;
- or
- an inherent ecological, geological or hydrological sensitivity to change that may be adversely affected by any change.

Following designation, the potential impact of any Type I or Unlisted Action on the environmental characteristics of the CEA is a relevant area of environmental concern and must be evaluated in the determination of significance prepared pursuant to Section 617.7 of SEQR.

Reservoir Park, and be under the control and management of the Park Commission. (Tuesday, July 25, 1911.)

The Olmsted Brothers' firm was engaged to the design the reservoir, its entrances, related buildings, and the steep, quarried slopes on either side of the reservoir (Op cit, 1994.). The reservoir itself, which still serves to supply Rochester with water, was built in 1908. The Olmsted firm also spent considerable time determining what trees would best serve to stabilize the steep slopes that surround much of the reservoir grounds.

Comeau (2013, p. 13) notes that, "In keeping with Reform Park trends, additional facilities soon followed, including tennis courts, a winter skating shelter, and ball fields." As part of this trend, the Eastern Widewaters area was developed for multiple different recreational purposes, the pond in which became known as Lake Riley after William Riley, the City's Commissioner of Parks from 1915-1918. In the early years the pond was used as a skating rink in the winter. In addition, two public-use buildings were erected on the park. One is Lake Riley Lodge, a depression-era building appropriately situated to overlook Lake Riley. The other, Tay House, is tucked into the Hillside overlooking the Martin B. Anderson school. Both buildings are extensively used. Lake Riley Lodge is currently the site of, among other things, an after-school program.

In response to war needs, in 1942, 9.14 acres of park land bordering Norris Drive was leased to the US army for use as MP barracks, and in 1944 prisoners of war quartered in the barracks on the land. With the end of the war, returning troops were briefly housed there, and then, in 1948, the city leased the land back from New York State for emergency housing for the elderly. In 1956 this land was alienated from the park to the Senior Citizens Housing Company on condition that it be used for "aged persons residing in Rochester." The land was to revert to the city in 2009, but in that year City Council extended the allocation until 2041. The current building owners, Rochester Management Inc., are seeking to raze the single-story buildings and erect multi-story apartments that will serve middle, rather than solely low-income citizens, and also require an extension of the time period that the land is available until 2061. This proposal is strongly opposed by a coalition of neighborhood groups and local volunteer organizations on

the basis that the multi-story buildings will destroy trees and degrade the park, and that it will diminish access to housing by seniors with very low incomes.

In 1972 and 1974 all, or virtually all the park, was locally designated as an historic landmark (Bayer Associates, 2009). In 1950 a refectory immediately West of the Cobbs Hill reservoir designed by Olmsted Brothers' firm was replaced by a police fire & radio building and tower, to which a garage and enlarged parking area were added in 1965. The current communications center, renovated in 1995, was the subject of an extensive cultural landscape preservation assessment (O'Donnell & Wilson, 1994).

A 2009 survey (Bayer Associates, 2009) notes that Cobbs Hill Park is spatially divided into multiple different use areas, and that separate entrances lead to different parts of the park. It is, for example, divided by Norris Drive, for which land was alienated from the park in 1924, which separates the Widewaters section, comprising Lake Riley, the field that surrounds it, Lake Riley Lodge, and the ball fields from the rest of the park. Speed bumps have been installed where there is the heaviest youth and child traffic across the road but is seen by many as an inadequate response. (The City of Rochester has allocated funding in its capital program for upgrading Norris Drive.) In 2017 the City, adding to options within Cobbs Hill Park, constructed a dog park at its northeast corner, across Norris Drive from the Monroe County Water Authority headquarters.

Considered part of Cobbs Hill Park, but physically separated from it, is Washington Grove. A group of citizens purchased 26 acres of ecologically significant old growth oak hickory forest to prevent it being used as a gravel pit, and in 1912 transferred the land to the City of Rochester as dedicated parkland. In 1932 the grove, on the bicentennial of his birth, was dedicated to George Washington. It became known as Washington Grove. Washington Grove was left relatively untended until 2008, when a volunteer group began studying the Grove and developing conservation strategies. In 2009 the group submitted a draft management plan to the City. Since that time volunteers have worked with the City to maintain a healthy representation of common native plants, control non-native invasive species, maintain trails, replant appropriate native plants as needed and raise funds necessary for its management. In 2013 this informal group registered as a New York State non-profit corporation, and in 2014, a

501(c)(3) corporation named The Friends of Washington Grove, Inc. In collaboration with the City, The Friends have since developed annual work plans, raised funds, planted native species, removed invasive species, improved trails and conducted tours (<http://friendsofwashingtongrove.org/>). Washington Grove is, however, separated from the rest of Cobbs Hill Park by land initially the property of the Rochester & Lake Ontario Water Company, and currently owned by the Monroe County Water Authority. Connections to Cobbs Hill Park are through highly eroded and inadequate paths.

Vision

Lewis (2002) argues that good parks positively affect real property values, increase municipal revenues, attract affluent retirees, attract knowledge workers and talent, and attract homebuyers. Nagel (2017) writes:

Investment in mixed-use infrastructure projects -- those that include both parks and green space -- is building a strong track record of leveraging public funds with private capital to address many of our most vexing urban challenges, including those relating to transportation, stormwater management and access to recreation. Beyond the economic and environmental benefits of mixed-use infrastructure, there are the well documented human health benefits of proximity to nature. Studies show that people exercise more if they have access to parks and including nature in the built environment improves quality of life and sense of community.

Ming Kuo (2015) lists the following health outcomes research has shown to benefit from regular walks in nature:

- Decreased urinary tract infections
- Decreased ADHD
- Decreased anxiety disorders
- Increased infant birthweight
- Decreased cancer incidence
- Decreased cardiovascular disease
- Decreased incidence of depression
- Decreased diabetes incidence
- Decreased musculoskeletal complaints
- Decreases in respiratory disease

We also note that Mayor Warren has committed Rochester to the 10-minute walk to parks project, and to the maintenance and enhancement of parks in general. We see this proposal as part of building a better Rochester and supporting a mayoral commitment.

Finally, we would like to see integration of Washington Grove with Cobbs Hill Park through the City's acquisition of the strip of land that separates the two. The Monroe County Water Authority no longer uses the water tanks on this property, which have now become popular wall art sites. In addition, we advocate for accessible access to Washington Grove from Cobbs Hill reservoir based on the proposals by EDR Associates in their report *Evaluation of trail entry conditions and recommendations for improvement* (2016). Acquiring this land would partially compensate for the land specifically donated by Rochester citizens for Cobbs Hill Park, excised during WWII for an emergency, and never returned.

We envision Cobbs Hill Park with a design that creates an integrated and inspiring whole. We envision it as being interpreted and managed as a cohesive whole, with awareness of its value as a natural, cultural and recreational resource. We envision a plan and management strategy that addresses issues of sustainability in a changing climate, one that seeks to optimize the parks' use by all Rochester citizens. We envision that a master plan, developed with input from the many constituencies that utilize and surround Cobbs Hill Park, is a first step in this process.

Issues to be Addressed in a Master Plan

The following is a list of issues that have been identified by the Coalition for Cobbs Hill Park. We anticipate that they will be expanded upon, and priorities identified through further meetings with City leadership and Rochester communities that make use of the park.

- There is no overall integration of separate parts of Cobbs Hill Park. It is, in many ways, multiple disconnected parks, without adequate paths or connections between them. The park requires a comprehensive people circulation system.
- There is no way-finding system within the park, nor signage on park history or vegetation interpretation.

- Trees on the reservoir slopes, at its northern edge, and the pinetum between it and Washington Grove, all aspects of the reservoir's original design are aging out, and there are no plans for their replacement.
- Invasive Norway Maples on the northern end of the reservoir (relics of a plantation that was intended for replanting elsewhere) and on its slopes, planted before they were recognized as such, negatively affect native species.
- Swallowwort (dog-strangling vine), which aggressively chokes out desirable species, interferes with forest regeneration, and toxic to livestock, deer and monarch butterfly larvae, is invading the slopes of Cobbs Hill.
- Lake Riley suffers from eutrophication, largely from drainage of nutrients from dog and geese feces, and fertilizers, directly into the pond. It lacks a vegetative barrier to filter out excess nutrients. It is unimaginatively shaped, lacks surrounding greenery (originally omitted to limit leaves on the skating pond), and lacks a surrounding walking path.
- The area between Lake Riley and the highway lacks greenery – additional trees and shrubs would further limit the visual impact of, and noise from, the highway.
- The southwest corner of the park (at Monroe and Culver) is treed, has no designated paths through it, is little used, and requires redesign.
- There are no spaces in the park that promote small group interaction; no gazebos or sets of chairs that face each other.
- Norris Drive, the main vehicular access to, and through, the lower portion of the park, has the following problems:
 - Inadequate storm drainage;
 - Undefined parking delineation resulting in parking on park lawns and compaction of park trees; and
 - Industrial (Monroe County Water Authority) and school bus traffic.
- There have been attacks on park land, exemplified by Rochester Management Inc.'s proposal to build multi-story apartments and town houses with the land the currently houses Cobbs Hill Village, and to extend the date at which the land will revert to the City or

Rochester, and the plan, approved by the Rochester Board of Zoning Appeals, by a private owner to build a house within five feet of the Washington Grove boundary.

- If multi-story buildings are erected in Cobbs Hill Village there will be significant tree die-off along Norris Drive which will require further planting, perhaps on the opposite side of Norris Drive, to diminish the visual impact of the property on the park.
- A section of the park is used to store leaves from the city fall leaf pickup.
- The city has staff who care about parks, but there is no parks department formally charged with advocating for their maintenance and development.

Proposal

The Coalition for Cobbs Hill Park proposes to work with the City of Rochester to:

- Further define terms of reference for the development of a master plan;
- Lobby for funding and community support for such a plan; and to
- Assist in recruiting and engage an organization that will develop a comprehensive master plan for Cobbs Hill Park.

We further proposed the following principles for planning and design within Cobbs Hill Park, ones developed in a series of sessions, Designing in Parks sponsored by National Parks Service, the National Parks Conservation Association, the Van Alen Institute and other partners

(Toothman, 2011):

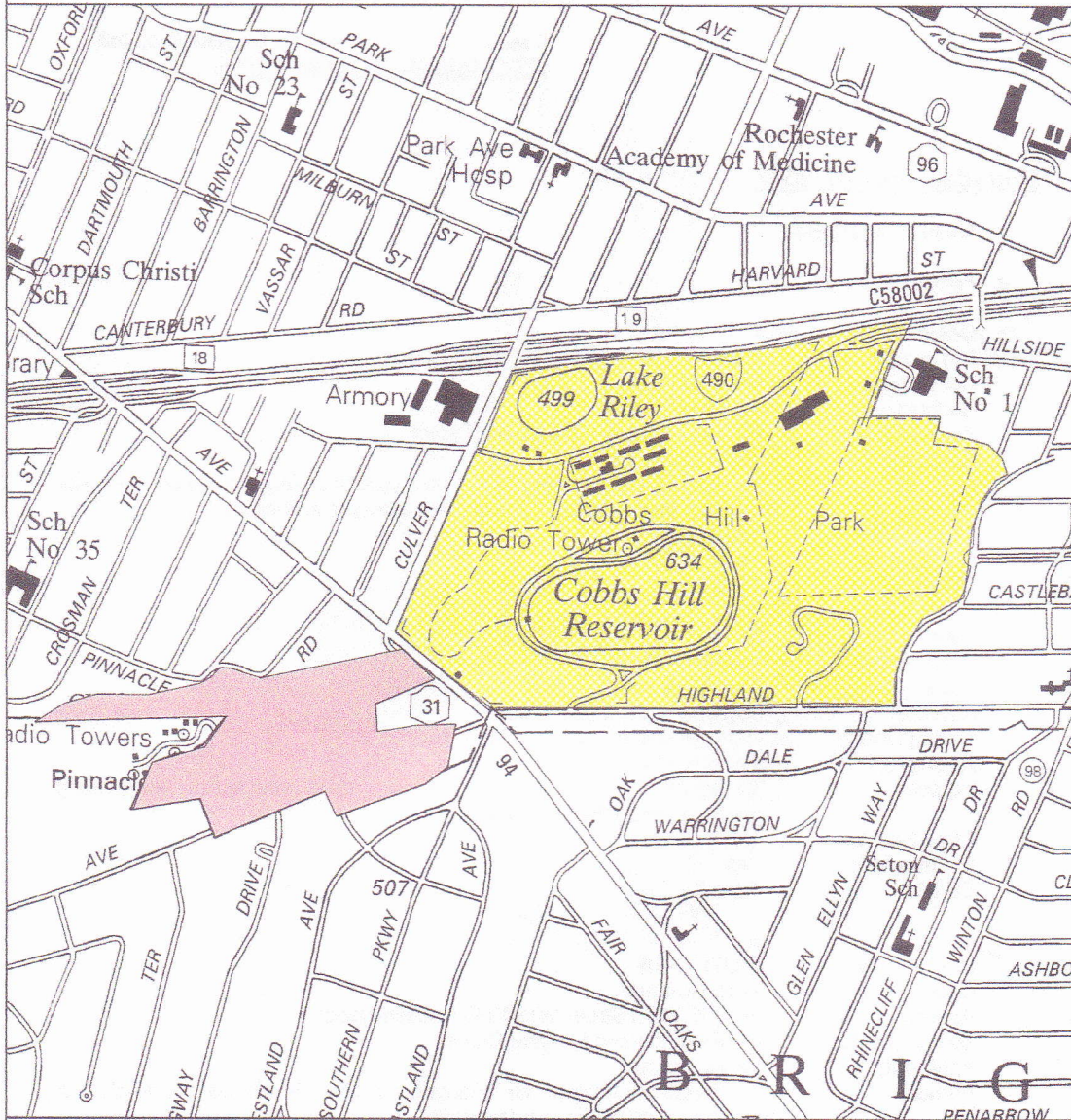
1. Reverence for place – understand and preserve the essential character of a place
2. Engagement of all people – connect people of diverse cultures, ages and interests to community, nature and mankind
3. Expansion beyond traditional boundaries – build, design and promote dynamic linkages and networks among parks, communities and natural systems
4. Advancement of sustainability – inspire stewardship through, and exercise leadership through, demonstration of sustainable practices
5. Informed decision-making – ensure that planning and design is based on a comprehensive knowledge of resources and attributes
6. Integrated research, planning, design and review process – reconcile a clear understanding of conflicting mandates through a clear determination of resource values, park management goals, and informed discussions.

The Coalition also proposes to work with the City to plan for a staff that can adequately serve and maintain the multiple parks and green spaces that the City currently manages.

Cobbs Hill Critical Environmental Area (CEA)

Effective Date of Designation: 3-14-86

Designating Agency: City of Rochester



Legend

- Adjacent CEA
- Cobbs Hill CEA



1 inch equals 1,000 feet

For Adjacent CEAs see map: R

Pinnacle Hill CEA

Base Map: DOT 1:24,000 Planimetric Images

Disclaimer: This map was prepared by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation using the most current data available. It is deemed accurate but is not guaranteed. NYS DEC is not responsible for any inaccuracies in the data. Please contact the designating authority for additional information regarding legal boundary descriptions.

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