

Minor work continues at Johnson Hills Park

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(Photo: Sheila Vilvens/The Community Press)

The future of W.M. Johnson Hills Park was a focus of the Anderson Township Park District's first regular meeting of 2015.

Executive Director Ken Kushner provided the "state of the union" address for Johnson Hills Park. His update included the park's history, planning process, work-to-date, and plans for major projects - should funds become available. The full report is available on the park district's website at www.andersonparks.com.

During public comment, resident Dr. Bob Drake again offered his services to conduct a scientifically valid survey that would accurately gauge public opinion on how Johnson Hills Park should be developed. Drake is a retired University of Cincinnati professor who has questioned park officials over the past few months about the Johnson Hills Park planning process and expressed his desire that the park remain natural. Drake is circulating a petition asking that the park remain in its current state.

Though complimentary of the park district and its planning and care of the community's parks, Drake contends that the methodology for gauging public opinion regarding the park was flawed. During the initial planning process, the park district conducted a survey and small group meetings to identify how residents would like the park to be developed.

Park Commission President Dale Bartholomew said the park commission declines Drake's offer to design a survey, noting that the staff is addressing other immediate needs and lacked the time to conduct another Johnson Hills Park survey. If another



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survey becomes necessary, the park district would likely seek the help of a neutral outside contractor. Since Drake has expressed his preference that the park remain in its natural state, a survey developed by him could reflect that bias, Bartholomew said.

There are no plans for significant work to take place in Johnson Hills Park this year due to a lack of funds, Kushner said. The last report to the board regarding the park was presented in April 2012. It seemed time to revisit the plans.

A master plan for the park was developed with community input via survey and meetings. The plan features active recreation in a passive setting, Kushner noted. The park district hired Human Nature to design the plans. Kushner called Human Nature "one of the most innovative and well-respected firms in the Cincinnati area." The final design was for a park to meet the recreational needs of the community that incorporated a nature-based design.

The initial plan was developed in 2001 and revised in 2009. Like most of the parks, the overall plan for Johnson Hills Park will take many years to accomplish, Kushner said. There is room for the plan to evolve pending available funding, community needs, use patterns, permit process and so forth.

The vision for Johnson Hills Park has always been of a different flavor than the other Anderson Township Parks, Kushner said.

"It was purposefully acquired to round out the ATPD's offerings to the community. The plan to include facilities and activities that complement the natural gifts of the property is a priority for park development," he said. The park is not intended to be a nature preserve, but it will include trails and open spaces.

The park district has owned the park for 15 years.

"We keep saying not a lot has happened up there. That's not exactly accurate," Kushner said. Every year since the land was purchased, improvements have been made including the construction of an extensive network of trails and the purchase of an adjacent property. The most significant change occurred when the private horse stable operation vacated the property.

Work on a list of major improvements will have to wait for funding. However, minor improvements can be accomplished as park visitation dictates and volunteer efforts and funding are available. The list of minor improvements includes: continue to promote the installation of sidewalks to connect the surrounding neighborhoods with the park, abandon the trail by homes along Crooked Stick and re-establish the trail further into the park, install gravel beds for future paved trail connections, continue to work with donors for the installation of an off-leash dog field, continue to work with disc golf volunteer group on the design and installation of the disc golf course, installation of park benches, picnic tables and family swings; trail enhancements; signage, and removal of structures, debris and invasive species.

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Johnson Hills Park timeline

1998 – Property offered – Owner Marian Barbour Johnson approached Anderson Township Park District (ATPD) about the purchase of her land; making it a legacy to her late husband, William McNeilan Johnson (Mac).

1998 – Property purchased - ATPD and the Hamilton County Park District (HCPD) paid Johnson \$1,125,000 (ATPD \$625,000 and HCPD \$500,000); agreed to allow Johnson to live out her life on the property.

1998 - Stipulations/Restrictions – Included in the deed is the restriction that the property remain a park in perpetuity. Of ATPD, Johnson also asked that “Mac’s” name be used in the name of the park and that the Dry Run Creek headwaters be recognized.

1999 – Property conveyed - Johnson passed away at which time 45 acres were conveyed to HCPD and 80.599 acres to ATPD. Johnson’s house and the surrounding 10.376 acres were also conveyed to ATPD (Daughters of the American Revolution had the right of first refusal).

2000 – Park land – In June the property officially became a public park property. The existing private horse stable business continued and a family continued to rent the house off Crooked Stick.

2001 – Plans – Initial plans for park designed.

2007 – Park opening – W. M. Johnson Hills Park opened to the public with limited use and ATPD dedicated an operation staff member to the park.

2009 – Continued planning – A second public planning process was conducted.

2010 – Stable vacates – the private horse stable vacates the property allowing public access to the pastures and other areas. Unsafe structures are removed and additional clean-up efforts begin.

2014 – Renters – The last of Johnson’s renters moved out.

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