



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION for  
OLMSTED  
PARKS

*“... advances Olmsted’s principles and legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people’s lives.”*

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January 14, 2019

**Alderman Robert Bauman**  
**Commission’s Chair**  
**Milwaukee’s Historic Preservation Commission**  
Zeidler Municipal Building  
841 N. Broadway, Room B-1  
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Dear Alderman Bauman:

The National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP) wishes to express its strong support for local (and national) historic landmark designation for Milwaukee’s Frederick Law Olmsted-designed Washington Park. Conferring this status will bring Washington Park the recognition it unquestionably deserves, on both a local and national level.

Washington Park and the linked park system of which it is a primary element, have the special distinction of being among Frederick Law Olmsted’s final public projects, capping his brilliant career as founder of the landscape architecture profession in America. Many of Washington Park’s character-defining Olmsted plan features remain essentially intact, despite inevitable, sometimes regrettable, alterations over time.

Designation stands to put Milwaukee in the esteemed company of cities across the United States that recognize, publicize and benefit from celebrating their Olmsted parks as the irreplaceable treasures they are. Olmsted parks can be a great asset to any city lucky enough to have them. The prestige that landmark stature confers can enhance property values, generate revenue, multiply public benefits, and attract landscape restoration funding.

Parks are valuable, irreplaceable public assets fundamental to human health and wellbeing. Parks are much more than merely real estate and need to be managed accordingly. To survive and thrive, parks require proper stewardship and adequate investment, both of which can be provided in traditional or innovative ways. Other cities have

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developed innovative public-private partnerships to restore, manage and activate their Olmsted parks, grounded in accurate understanding of the nature and value of these landscapes. Many of

these parks have been reclaimed from neglect and misuse, helping stimulate community investment and revitalization. Responsible public stewardship of Olmsted parks can actually help transform the city in positive ways.

Successful transformations require money, time and effort, but the payoff is great. The multiplier effect can be significant and quantifiable. The Trust for Public Land's groundbreaking 2009 analysis and quantification of the multiple dimensions of value parks confer is important reading in this regard: <http://cloud.tpl.org/pubs/ccpe-econvalueparks-rpt.pdf>. Five of six of their case studies focus on Olmsted-related landscapes.

Links attached to this letter offer useful information about four Olmsted parks that have benefitted from public-private collaboration. These particular parks resemble Washington Park in key ways: they were built in a similar era, are large in size, include a variety of landscape elements, and incorporate water features in their design. They include South Park in Buffalo, NY; Cherokee Park in Louisville, KY; Branch Brook Park in Newark, NJ; and Franklin Park in Boston, MA. The organizations involved can be good resources for leaders to tap in charting Milwaukee County's future management approach for Washington Park.

These four parks demonstrate that heritage and ecologically healthy landscapes are not mutually exclusive. A great many Olmsted parks include natural areas, some carefully created, some enhanced remnants of undeveloped land. Natural landscapes need to be managed for their woodland, wetland or grassland character. However, park land intended for other use or landscape character likewise need to be managed consistently with that intent. Cultural landscape integrity suffers when vegetation is altered without reference to historical context, and rarely is justifiable or necessary.

Many Olmsted parks offer nature-based environmental education programs. In Olmsted's park design work, he championed the fundamental importance of providing restorative natural settings accessible to people from all walks of life – a precursor to today's movement for "nature nearby." Washington Park is well suited to engage youth and neighbors in habitat stewardship projects as well as activities such as tree inventory and planting, helping implement approved restoration plans **for its lagoon and other existing natural areas**, and citizen science through monitoring wildlife, water quality and plant health. The educational, vocational and community-building opportunities are enormous. We understand that Urban Ecology Center offers such valuable programming.

Nonetheless, given all these possibilities as well as the park's historic significance, it seems premature for Milwaukee County to enter into a long-term, binding agreement that removes management direction and oversight from public control, for substantial prime acreage in Washington Park. NAOP urges caution regarding

long-term leasing of any portion of the park to a private entity without carefully evaluating proposed terms within the framework of a comprehensive restoration and management plan for the park as a whole, guided by a cultural landscape report. An excellent model is the recent [Buffalo South Park Arboretum Restoration Feasibility Study](#) (April 2018, Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy) <https://view.publitas.com/bopc/sparp-feasibility-study-full/page/1>

At very minimum, the Urban Ecology Center's proposed planting plan and long-term management commitments need to be peer reviewed based on ecological restoration standards, and also by heritage landscape experts for consistency with historic intent. Appropriateness, feasibility and accountability are tantamount. Responsible stewardship of this significant public asset requires exercise of rigorous due diligence. Resorting to de-facto public divestment of Washington Park could significantly and permanently devalue this irreplaceable public asset.

Washington Park needs to be understood as an important created landscape, not remnant native habitat or a despoiled brownfield. "Restoration" of a designed landscape requires very specific and different approaches. Frederick Law Olmsted's original design carefully orchestrated uses, vistas and movement through the landscape into an experiential and aesthetic whole. The park's lake was created as a focal point for views and activity, inspired by the lagoon system he masterminded for the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition site, as a counterpoint to the White City's commanding formality. Native and naturalistic plantings and passages of scenery were designed in great detail. Olmsted employed the same approach in Washington Park soon after.

NAOP appreciates that aging urban parks pose great challenges to resource-strapped jurisdictions like Milwaukee. The good news is that similar cities have pioneered ways to reclaim such parks as productive community assets and fiscal engines. The common denominator among successful cities is that they have harnessed information, determination and collaboration, each in their own way. Experiences shared by those involved in these efforts can help Milwaukee achieve similar outcomes for the greater good and provide guidance to ensure that private support complements public stewardship.

NAOP has long recognized the untapped value of Milwaukee's Olmsted park system. Peer cities across the country are currently laying plans to celebrate "Olmsted 2022," the bicentennial of Frederick Law Olmsted's birth. This coordinated effort will attract broad attention and bring visitors in great numbers to Olmsted park cities. NAOP encourages Milwaukee to participate in this exciting initiative by preparing to showcase its special Olmsted landscapes, especially Lake and Washington parks. We anticipate that this civic investment will be richly repaid. The NAOP website provides planning information and updates: <http://olmsted.org/outreach/olmsted-2022-the-legacy>

Established in 1980, NAOP is a coalition of design and preservation professionals, historic property and park managers, scholars, municipal officials, citizen activists,

and representatives of numerous Olmsted organizations around the United States. Its concern is the legacy of landscape work left by Frederick Law Olmsted and the firm continued by his sons, John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. NAOP is the only national organization solely dedicated to preserving the Olmsted legacy by providing the advocacy, research, and education needed to protect, restore, and maintain these exemplary parks and landscapes.

NAOP appreciates this opportunity to provide comments regarding the future of Washington Park as it hangs in the balance. We hope that you find these remarks informative, encouraging and, in some measure, inspiring. Washington Park's Olmsted heritage is significant and, we believe, rich with unrealized value to the people of Milwaukee County.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lucy Lawliss".

Lucy Lawliss  
NAOP Chair