

Oriole Grove Preserve Master Plan

INTRODUCTION

Oriole Grove Forest Preserve is an 86-acre preserve located in southeast Lake County within portions of both the Village of Lake Bluff and the City of Lake Forest. Oriole Grove is a keystone preserve within a much larger landscape of 282 acres of preserved natural areas along the Skokie River Corridor. Lake Bluff Open Lands Association (LBOLA) manages a 35-acre preserve to the north and Lake Forest Open Lands Association (LFOLA) owns and manages a 119-acre preserve to the south. Another 42 acres are dedicated Illinois State Natural Areas on private property which complete the expanded area of protected open space. Oriole Grove has been enjoyed for the past few decades as a quiet retreat for visitors from the adjacent associations and neighborhoods. Miles of unimproved trails form a network through the holdings of all three agencies and connect to two major regional trail systems, the North Shore Bike Path which links other forest preserves with the Des Plaines River and the Skokie Valley Bike Path.

SITE HISTORY SUMMARY

Prior to Euro-American settlement in the early 1800's, the lands bordering the Skokie River were a combination of prairie and open wetlands with a scattering of small oak groves. Primarily used as livestock pasture in the 1800's, it was purchased and became part of a gentleman's farm in the early 1900's. An impressive estate house and farm buildings were constructed. Hired to design the landscape was Jens Jensen, one of the most significant landscape architects in Chicago history. His design included the kidney-shaped pond that lies in the center of the current preserve. In the 1920's the river was channelized and the wet soils along the river were drained for row crop agriculture by installing an underground tile system.

In 1980 the rear portion of the estate was acquired jointly by the State of Illinois and the District as a potential stormwater flood storage facility. Several years later an engineering study determined that the site was not feasible for stormwater storage. Planning for any potential improvements were delayed because the District did not have full ownership. After several years of discussion and extensive negotiations with the State, the District took full ownership of Oriole Grove in September of 2019. At this point no public access improvements have been made at Oriole Grove.

RESOURCE SUMMARY

While much of the site has become overgrown with invasive plants such as buckthorn and honeysuckle, there remains significant restoration potential with key existing components to build from. The site's hydrology provides a strong foundation for the restoration of a sedge meadow and prairie similar to LFOLA's Shaw Prairie to the south. There is also a small mesic prairie remnant in southeast part of the site, a 4.4-acre pond known as Jensen Pond, with higher quality water that supports regionally uncommon fish species and partially restored oak savanna and woodlands.

To date, there have been approximately 178 native plant species and 135 wildlife species documented at Oriole Grove. Restoration efforts have been conducted by outside contractors, the District's site steward and LBOLA.

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PROJECT PURPOSE, GOALS AND PROCESS

This Master Plan builds upon the District's strategic vision by balancing public access needs and desires, public safety and valuable habitat restoration. The plan reflects the District's continued commitment to natural and historical preservation, outdoor recreation and education.

The Master Plan process began in 2019, led by an interdepartmental planning team comprised of three departments. A public open house was held in-person on September 22, 2020 at the Greenbelt Cultural Center. A virtual Special Planning Committee Meeting was also held on October 26, 2020. Both events provided the public with the opportunity to view and discuss two concept plans that explored a full range of ideas for habitat restoration and public access improvements. Approximately 30 people attended the events, where members of staff and the Board of Commissioners were available to discuss the concepts and gather feedback. During these events and a six-week online comment period, members of the public were able to share their ideas through verbal discussion, written comment cards, digital comment cards and emails. The District received over 80 submitted comments.

The Master Plan goals include:

- Provide an improved public access and recreation experience that is ADA compliant and reduces short and long-term operating costs.
- Create ways for the public to view and enjoy the cultural landscape feature of Jensen Pond.
- Continue ongoing restoration efforts and dedicate new areas for improving the natural landscape that are consistent with our 100-year vision and landscape-scale conservation goals.
- Restore much of the original hydrology, create high quality sedge meadow, control invasive species and install aquatic, wetland and savanna plants.

PRELIMINARY MASTER PLAN

Based on the feedback from staff, commissioners, key stakeholders and the public, the planning team prepared a final Master Plan for Oriole Grove Forest Preserve that strikes the appropriate balance between the Master Plan goals and competing interests.

Ecological Restoration

The site has been divided into 7 restoration units based primarily upon land use history and current conditions. Proposed activities include:

- Clearing and control of invasive woody and herbaceous species
- Installation of aquatic and wetland plant species in and around the pond
- Reforestation
- Rehydrating wetlands through drain tile removal and/or disablement
- Installation of wetland plants and native seed throughout site
- Wetland planting and stream enhancement along the river

When complete, there will be:

- 21 acres of upland prairie restored
- 25 acres of woodland restoration and reforestation
- 33 acres of wetland restored

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Public Access Improvements

Improvements for this preserve are being proposed for the first time and include:

- Reconfigure the existing trail network and create 1.3 miles of new fully accessible crushed stone trails, including a loop around Jensen Pond
- Create a scenic overlook at the pond as a destination spot where visitors can experience the cultural history of the site. A marker to acknowledge donors and interpretive exhibits could be located here.
- Replace the steel bridge over the Skokie River
- Construct two new boardwalks at wetland crossings
- Add woody plants to create a buffer at the entrance and at the pond overlook
- Through a partnership, restore the trail connection to LFOA

IMPLEMENTATION

Funding for these planned improvements has not been identified. Implementation of the planned improvements will not begin until (i) full funding has been secured by means of private donations through the Preservation Foundation or other grant opportunities to support site improvements and habitat restoration and (ii) full funding has been secured to establish a dedicated endowment to provide for on-going maintenance of the preserve.