



LAKE COUNTY FOREST PRESERVES
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Preservation, Restoration, Education and Recreation

DATE: July 6, 2015

MEMO TO: Bonnie Thomson Carter, Chair
Planning and Restoration Committee

FROM: Michael G. Tully
Chief Operations Officer

SUBJECT: Policy Direction Regarding the Request to Open Trails to Cyclists Beyond Existing Operational Hours

RECOMMENDATION: Policy direction requested on whether to consider expanded trail hours.

BACKGROUND: In October of last year, staff brought forward a request for Policy Direction on a request from the League of Illinois Bicyclists to leave the District's trails open until 10 p. m., instead of closing them at sunset.

After a lengthy conversation, Committee rejected the request as written, but asked staff to analyze the impact of opening up to one hour earlier, and closing the preserves at sunset or 6:00 p.m., whichever is later. Staff has done so and a summary of that analysis follows. As we discussed in the fall, it would be the preserves, and not just the trails, that would be opened longer hours, as there is no practical way to close a preserve and leave the trails within open.

COST CONSIDERATIONS:

Opening Earlier

The preserves are currently opened daily by 6:30 a.m. To get all gates open on time, Public Safety staff currently begins work at 5:15 a.m. In addition to the manually opened gates, there are 17 gates that are set up to open automatically on electronic timers. If the opening time for the preserves switches to 5:30 a.m., we would have two options to get all the gates opened on time:

1. Start public safety staff at 4:15 a.m. This option is operationally and financially untenable.
2. Install automatic gate technology on all gates (56), at an estimated cost of \$450,000. Capital dollars are not available for a project of this magnitude without dropping an approved project, or projects, off the District's current five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP).

Closing Later

The preserves, with a number of exceptions, close at sunset. If the closing time changed to sunset or 6:00 p.m., whichever is later, the preserves would close after sunset from October 22 (sunset 5:59) through March 12 (sunset 5:54). The greatest difference would be on December 16 which has a sunset time of 4:20 p.m. Public Safety staff is on shift until 10:00 p.m. year round, so closing at 6:00 p.m. should not result in extra patrol costs. Keep in mind, however, that we start closing gates at sunset, and it takes a couple of hours to get everything cleared and secured. So closing at 6:00 p.m. means the last gate is secured at approximately 8:00 p.m. Also, as we have learned at the Dog Exercise Areas, which close at sunset or 7:00 p.m., it is sometimes hard to locate preserve users in the dark, even in fenced-in areas. Some overtime costs will likely occur as officers make sure all preserve users are accounted for in the dark.

In addition to Public Safety overtime, there would be some additional overtime costs during the winter as snow plow crews will have to keep the plows running a little longer some days.

Although not part of the Committee's request, if it opened preserves earlier or closed them later, the District might also consider the cost of some additional lighting in the preserves. With very few exceptions, the District's roadways, parking lots, toilet buildings and trails have no lights.

SAFETY CONCERNS:

Since April, 2014, there have been 23 bicycle accidents in the preserves that were serious enough to require a response from the Public Safety Department. Twelve of these accidents occurred on the Des Plaines River Trail. These accidents occurred during normal operational (daylight) hours. Undoubtedly there have been numerous other accidents that were not reported. Although not occurring recently, the District has responded to cyclists involved in nighttime accidents that have resulted in serious injuries to riders.

As we discussed in the fall, the District's trails were designed for a recreational experience, but not for efficient commuting by bicycle or for high-speed bicycle training. They curve and meander through open fields and woodlands. They are, with very few exceptions, gravel surfaced that can at times be loose or rough. Loose leaves, downed limbs, snow, ice, flooded underpasses, and even animals such as deer become potential hazards in the dark. In addition, there are numerous elements that could become obstacles in the dark: fences, gates, bridges, benches, sign posts, and culverts. At a minimum, many of these should probably be outfitted with reflective material so they are more visible at night. This would add to the cost considerations as well.

In reviewing this proposal with PDRMA, they pointed out that an injured party could contend that, if the District offers lighted trails with lighted parking lots in some locations or at some times, it is admitting that unlighted trails with unlighted parking lots in other locations or at other times are unsafe. Subsequently, if there is an accident in the dark at one of these other locations or at one of these other times, the District could be open to a legal action and certain legal expenses to defend itself.

Director of Public Safety John Tannahill is concerned whether his staff can keep the preserves safe if all of them are open later in the winter months. Currently, after most preserves close at sunset in the winter, his staff is focused on the few areas that remain open: four dog exercise areas, two lighted trails, sled hill, ice rink, and ice fishing areas. This opens opportunity for unwanted activities in other preserves that are less likely to be observed by the Ranger Police. Also, the Ranger Police are responsible for closing and clearing quickly, and keeping watch on the preserves in which deer management is being implemented. It is imperative that we keep nighttime users out of these preserves.

STAFF SUMMARY and RECOMMENDATION:

While the request, as originally presented, was focused on commuters using the trails to bicycle to and from work, public comments made it clear that the real issue was making the trails more available for recreation and exercise during the winter months. While staff understands the desire for expanded trail hours, the request certainly raises a number of difficulties.

From an operational and financial standpoint, staff recommends not opening the preserves earlier than 6:30 a.m. The costs of the additional manpower and/or installation of electronic gates are prohibitive at this time.

From an operational and risk management standpoint, staff recommends not keeping the preserves open until 6:00 p.m. or sunset, whichever is later. While certain preserve users desire expanded hours, the liability and risk to which the District would be exposed is prohibitive.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION: Policy Direction is required to change operational hours of the preserves.

REVIEW BY OTHERS: Executive Director, Risk Manager, Director of Public Safety, Director of Operations and Infrastructure, Director of Finance, Director of Administration, Director of Planning and Land Preservation.

FINANCIAL DATA: To be determined.

PRESENTER: Michael G. Tully