

In February 2014, the Dakota County Board of Commissioners recognized a need for additional public involvement on the draft Lebanon Hills Master Plan and update related to controversy over specific plan proposals, particularly the Connector Trail. The Citizen Advisory Panel was established as a result.

Part 1 - Composition

A) The Board-appointed panel could be perceived as unbalanced representation of citizens and park user groups, especially if intended to be representative of Dakota County residents.

1. Appointed members included 15 men and five women.
2. The Citizen Advisory Panel included six individuals with park planning affiliations predisposed to park development, including the Director of Anoka County Parks.

B) Two members resigned early in the process and positions were not filled despite a large pool of candidates.

Part 2 - Proceedings

A) Paid consultants and staff were not there "as needed for technical assistance", but rather to ensure that panel members only consider select data that supported the 2013 draft plan and update conclusions.

1. Data from national sources and Met Council which supported elements of the plan were presented. Data available from the same sources but less supportive of the plan was not presented.
2. Comparison to other regional parks with regard to bikeways was frequently presented, indicating Dakota County was lagging. Comparisons with regard to marketing, programming, staffing and budgeting, which also lag in Dakota County, were not presented.
3. A select portion of a Dakota County Park System Survey was presented showing paved trails in parks is a high priority of residents. A panel member requested the complete survey data, which showed that paved trails in parks are not as highly rated as portrayed by the consultant. Staff provided panel members with a revised and over-simplified version which did not tell the complete findings.
4. Panel requested 2001 Master Plan implementation data. Staff provided skewed data by excluding Development spending, which was more than triple the spending for stewardship, giving the panel a false picture of the county's record.

B) Information requested by panel members to make informed decisions was not provided. Most notable, a breakdown of budgets was never provided despite repeated requests.

1. Staff did not provide cost estimates for initial construction or annual maintenance of proposed new paved trails and additional planned infrastructure.
2. Staff did not explain how the county will accommodate increased annual expenses incurred by implementation of the draft plan.
3. Staff did not explain how the county would adequately fund pertinent park services such as staffing (including a volunteer coordinator), programming, marketing, outreach, stewardship while also adequately funding annual expenses for new development.

C) Open discussion among panel members was suppressed and there was no opportunity for public input.

1. An inordinate amount of meeting time was consumed by consultants.
2. Facilitator suppressed open discussions with comments such as:
 - a) "Are there any burning comments...?"
 - b) "And your point is...?"
 - c) "We'll get back to that another time..."

3. Opinions from consultants were interjected.
 - a) "I wouldn't do that if I were you..." ended a panel suggestion for a moratorium to limit development.
 - b) "Trust us..." ended panel discussion on construction details.
4. As defined by the operating guidelines, public comments or testimony was not allowed. Given the public interest on this issue, this may not have served in the best interest of county residents.

D) Panel members received agendas and meeting materials without adequate time to prepare for meetings.

1. Panel request to receive materials at least one week prior to meetings for adequate time to review, consider and provide meaningful input for discussion, was not accommodated.
2. Agendas, meeting notes, suggested reading and lengthy presentation material were typically made available two days prior to meetings: June 10 for June 12 meeting; June 23 for June 25 meeting; July 16 for July 17 meeting

E) There was no opportunity for review of Final Report by the panel as a whole.

1. Draft versions were written by the facilitator and provided to panel members.
2. A 27-page draft final report was provided to panel members on Fri, 12/5, at 4:15pm, for review and comment at the final meeting on Mon., 12/8.
3. Further refinements and additions to the Report were made after the final panel meeting.
4. A 45-page Final Report was provided by staff to panel members on 12/31 (New Year's Eve) with request for comments due by noon the following Monday, 1/5/15.

Conclusion: The Citizen Advisory Panel was not established to participate in the process of updating the 2001 Master Plan. This is evident considering the 2001 Plan was only provided to panel members after repeated requests by concerned citizens. Rather, the Panel was created and proceedings controlled in a manner that would enable Dakota County to change the direction Lebanon Hills was heading, as proposed in the 2008 Parks Plan.

If the 2014 draft plan is intended to serve as an update to the 2001 plan, the following suggestions are offered as part of this minority report.

- Stronger levels of commitment, both financial and implementation, to catch up on the desperately needed ecological restoration of the park as clearly called for in the 2001 Master Plan and highly prioritized by Dakota County residents.
- Recreation areas and trails should be designed to provide the best opportunities to all visitors, including those not currently served by the park, without negating the intrinsic value of this park's natural resource base.
- Prioritize restoration and additional pertinent park services such as programming, marketing, and staffing (including a volunteer coordinator) before increasing the park's development footprint. Any additional infrastructure should serve to compliment, not conflict with, the high-quality nature-based recreation and education Lebanon Hills is valued for.

This will help to assure greater public support for the plan update and the best possible opportunities for all those coming to the park now and in the future in a fiscally sustainable manner.

Respectfully submitted,

Holly Jenkins
LHRP 2014 Citizen Advisory Panel Member
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