

Save the Date – Wednesday, Feb. 28!

You're Invited to attend

Wilderness in the City Annual Meeting and Celebration

Highlights Include:

- The inaugural **A Legacy of Nature Award** honoring Vance and Darlene Grannis
- Nationally acclaimed wildlife and nature photographer Benjamin Olson
- Recap of WITC's 2017 achievements and plans for 2018

Wednesday, Feb. 28

6:00 - 8:00 pm

Bald Man Brewing, 2020 Silver Bell Rd., Eagan

Hearty appetizers - \$10 per person

Cash bar * Live Music

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What's Inside

- ✓ Details Matter when Implementing Plans
- ✓ Decision Pending: Trailside Benches
- ✓ Update: Natural Gas Pipeline Expansion
- ✓ Improving an Ecosystem
- ✓ Why trees are being cut down
- ✓ Critter Corner - Barred Owls
- ✓ Upcoming events—and more!

Gone from Lebanon Hills



For decades, these quaint rustic shelters embodied the unique character of Lebanon Hills.

The 2015 Lebanon Hills Master Plan states that these quaint roofed picnic tables will be evaluated for soundness and improvement needs "*followed by repair or replacement*".

As part of implementing the Master Plan, staff recently evaluated the shelters and found most were deteriorated. They decided the shelters were underutilized and not in good locations. Contrary to the Master Plan to repair or replace, the rustic shelters were removed.

These decisions were made in an isolated manner. If the public had been involved in the process, these quaint shelters may have been repaired or replaced and preserved for years ahead, with their locations identified on park maps so visitors knew where they were.

To help preserve the unique character of Lebanon Hills, people should be involved in the decision making process as the Master Plan is implemented in years ahead. Going forward—decisions should be made with people, instead of for people.

Our Wilderness, Our Future - A Community Discussion

Thank you for joining us on November 14! We had a great time, and hope you did too.

Our featured presenter, Amy Freeman, shared stories from her Year in the Boundary Waters and advocacy efforts for this Minnesota treasure. Dakota County's Natural Resources staff provided an informative and inspiring update on restoration efforts at Lebanon Hills. And Benjamin Olson shared his award winning wildlife and nature photography for all to enjoy. Special thanks to Dakota County Forever Wild Parks for co-sponsoring this event.

Our appreciation to Commissioner Joe Atkins and State Senator Jim Carlson for attending and joining the discussion.



Join us this November for the 2nd Annual **Our Wilderness, Our Future.**

Implementing Master Plans: Details Lack Public Involvement

Who's in Charge of the Details?

Several County departments oversee park issues— Visitor Services, Capital Projects, Maintenance, Natural Resources, and more. There is not a single department or person in charge of all aspects of park planning. As such, when Master Plans are implemented:

- Decisions are made by various departments without a shared or comprehensive vision of the County Park's motto, "Forever Wild".
- Details are not always shared between departments, with the Planning Commission, or with the public.
- Details have been decided based on standards at other parks; *for Lebanon Hills, that will erode the parks unique character.*

All departments get direction from the **Dakota County Board of Commissioners.**



Recent Decisions without Public Involvement



The decision to add power to a rustic setting, and location of transformer boxes adjacent to natural trails, may have had been different if people have been involved in the decision.



The decision to use asphalt, which negatively impacts the environment, might have been different if people had been involved in the decision.

Decision Pending: Trailside Benches at Lebanon Hills

People have not been asked to weigh in—we think you should. Dakota County is planning to install benches along natural trails throughout Lebanon Hills. The Master Plan describes simple wooden or stone benches – details are being decided now.

- While enjoying the natural trails at Lebanon Hills and you approach a bench, do you prefer to see concrete or natural ground?
- Does your vision for "Forever Wild" include rest areas with cement pads or natural surfaces?
- Similar to the rustic picnic shelters– if the planned cement pads are not maintained, what will they look like after several years of snow and ice, and growth of tree roots?

Proposed by Dakota County - standard at other parks



- Benches set on a precast concrete base
- Concrete will extend a short distance beyond the bench
- Bench material, cost, installation schedule and locations are unknown at this time.

A Suggested Alternative - maintain unique character



- A rustic design and soft base would better reflect the park departments motto "Forever Wild".
- Chipped bark or pebbles for a base would complement character with the park.

For Our Parks: Bringing the Public Back into Decision Making

Wilderness in the City is advocating for a Parks and Natural Resources Advisory Commission.

Without a viable Parks Commission, Lebanon Hills and "Forever Wild" parks will continue to move in a new direction.

Current Process

The Dakota County Planning Commission (PC) serves as an advisory body for a broad scope of work, including review of master plans for Dakota County Parks.

- Staff presents on a variety of topics to the PC during two-hour meetings, one time per month.
- Based on staff presentations and brief discussions, the Planning Commission recommends to the County Board whether or not to approve staff recommendations.

Respectful of the work they do, yet recognizing their broad scope of issues, there is limited opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process for all areas pertinent to county parks.

- Staff presents master plans, which are considered concepts to guide park development in years ahead.
- Staff makes recommendations, which are almost always approved by the PC.
- The PC has no role during the critical stages of implementing master plans --when details are determined and projects are prioritized.

Improving the Process

A Dakota County Parks and Natural Resources Advisory Commission should be established and involved in decisions for issues impacting Lebanon Hills and Forever Wild parks.

- A Parks Commission separate from the Planning Commission would allow both groups adequate time to fully grasp details of all issues they are working on.
- Separate advisory bodies would be consistent with the structure of most other regional park implementing agencies.

An advisory body whose scope of work focuses on all aspects of park planning would benefit our communities. Among other things, they could:

- Participate in creating *and implementing* park master plans.
- Improve accountability to help assure ongoing management of natural resources.
- Help assure that decisions relating to park development are consistent with priorities of taxpayers.

The Time for Change is NOW!

During the next five years, many decisions impacting our parks will be made including:

- Lebanon Hills Connector Trail Study
- Dakota County Parks System Plan Update
- Several park master plans and natural resource management plans

These decisions deserve meaningful public involvement throughout the process, and before decisions are made -- which is different than the current process.

Contact your elected County Commissioner.

- ✓ Tell them you want meaningful public involvement in the decision making process for Dakota County Parks.
- ✓ Ask them to establish a Parks and Natural Resources Commission, separate from a Planning Commission.

UPDATE: Lebanon Hills Natural Gas Pipeline Expansion



Following a delay due to changes in administration at the Federal Level, the project is now approved and is scheduled during 2018.

- Some tree removal is expected in January and construction of the new line expected to begin in April.
- To minimize impacts, most of the line will be installed using horizontal directional drilling.
- Complete restoration of impacted areas will help assure minimal short or long-term impact.

In response to public input during the early stages of this project, changes were made to the construction technique and requirements for ongoing maintenance of the corridor, which should help to minimize impact to the park's landscape and wildlife habitats now and in years ahead.

For more information, visit Dakota County Park's website and click "Improvement Projects".

Our Mission

Wilderness in the City is dedicated to preserving and enhancing natural urban areas for future generations of people and wildlife.

We are grassroots, 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, fully supported by donations from our members. All donations are 100% tax-deductible.

Become a supporting member today! Visit our website www.wildernessinthecity.org.

"The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders."
~ Edward Abbey

Thank you for your support!

Long-term Goal: A Healthy Ecosystem for Lebanon Hills

Native wildflowers and grasses; prairies, oak savannahs, woodlands; water, wildlife; pollinators and monarchs; nature based recreation and education—all this, and more, will benefit from a healthy ecosystem within Lebanon Hills.

For decades, Dakota County residents have prioritized taking care of natural resources at Lebanon Hills. Most recently, this came through loud and clear throughout the public input process for the 2015 Lebanon Hills Master Plan. To achieve the goal of a healthy ecosystem, a **Lebanon Hills Natural Resources Management Plan** is currently being created.



BEFORE: Dying Forest



AFTER: Healthy Ecosystem

Once a final plan is adopted, overall restoration will take several years. Some projects are already underway. You will notice changes where these projects have started. Come back often and watch the progress!

Thanks to the Dakota County Board and the Park Natural Resources staff for their ongoing commitment to reversing the downward trend of natural resources at Lebanon Hills.

Frequently Asked Question

"Why are so many trees marked or being cut down in Lebanon Hills?"



The tree removal taking place is part of the initial stages for overall park restoration and ongoing management of natural resources. This restoration effort has started in East segment of the park -- the preserve zone -- which encompasses the highest quality natural areas. You will notice significant changes which may seem alarming. The end result, however, will be a healthy natural-resource based park for future generations.

Details about the restoration work will be highlighted in our April newsletter. You can also learn more about projects started on Dakota County Parks website.

Critter Corner - Barred Owl



The Barred Owl's hooting call, "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?" is a classic sound of old forests and treed swamps. But this attractive owl, with soulful brown eyes and brown-and-white-striped plumage, can also pass completely unnoticed as it flies noiselessly through the dense canopy or snoozes on a tree limb.

Barred Owls eat many kinds of small animals, including squirrels, chipmunks, mice, voles, rabbits, birds (up to the size of grouse), amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates. They hunt by sitting and waiting on an elevated perch, while scanning all around for prey with their sharp eyes and ears. They may perch over water and drop down to catch fish, or even wade in shallow water in pursuit of fish and crayfish.

Though they do most of their hunting right after sunset and during the night, sometimes they feed during the day. Barred Owls may temporarily store their prey in a nest, in the crook of a branch, or at the top of a snag. They swallow small prey whole and large prey in pieces, eating the head first and then the body.

The oldest recorded Barred Owl was at least 24 years, 1 month old. It was banded in Minnesota in 1986, and found dead, entangled in fishing gear, in the same state in 2010.

Learn more at: www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Barred_Owl/id

Announcements & Events

Wilderness in the City is proud to be a new member of **The Minnesota Environmental Partnership (MEP)** -- a statewide coalition that exists to help diverse environmental nonprofits be successful by working together.

Natural Resource Volunteer Events

The 2018 schedule of events will be available on our website by March 1.

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Visit our booth at these events:

Eagan Community Connections
Sat., Mar. 3, 11am-3pm
www.cityofeagan.com/community-connections

Outdoor Adventure Expo, Minneapolis

Fri. thru Sun., Apr 27-29
www.outdooradventureexpo.com