

Friends of Silverwood Park

P.O. Box 304, Edgerton, WI 53534

www.silverwoodpark.org

Wednesday, March 8, 2017

Dane County Park Commission
c/o Dane County Parks Division
5201 Fen Oak Drive, Room 208
Madison, WI 53718

Dear Park Commissioners:

The purpose of this communication is to address our shared interest in the development of Silverwood Park, and your responsibility to provide direction for the stewardship of County-owned lands in Dane County parks.

As you may know, most tillable soil at Silverwood Park has been farmed intensively and conventionally for more than 40 years. The result is that the soil is almost completely depleted. Annual chemical pesticide use means that the soil is virtually devoid of organic matter and can absorb only limited amounts of water. It has no life, and, for example, produces food with considerably less nutrients and holds considerably less water...contributing to soil erosion.

These problems are common on the great majority of conventionally farmed lands in Dane County and Wisconsin. Conventional farming has proven to seriously degrade the environment, pollute waters, minimize biodiversity, prevent soil carbon sequestration, create nutrient deficient food, and impoverish the farmer.

It is not surprising, then, that visitors, friends and growers working at Silverwood have seen that sustaining these soils is not an adequate solution to improve the growing conditions on the land. The Friends of Silverwood Park (FOSP) believes the soils at the Park must be rebuilt before they can be expected to regularly produce nutritious, high quality grains, vegetables or fruits. To this end, FOSP asks the Dane County Park Commission to support a transition of Silverwood's tillable soils to a regenerative practice that, once attained, can lead to sustainability. Until that regenerative work is done, growing food at Silverwood will remain a losing battle.

This year, we are pleased that Dane County Parks has taken the step to agree to the conversion of 24 acres for organic use. The County leased this acreage to an organic grain and bean grower, Mark Doudlah, who has joined the FOSP grower group at Silverwood. Mr. Doudlah will also lease 10+ acres from FOSP that have not had regular pesticide application for 3-4 years. He will also apparently "caretake" another 44 currently leased by the University of Wisconsin.

Mr. Doudlah has a significant record of success and a passion for public and farmer education. His participation could be a "game changer" for the Park. If given the opportunity, he and other organic growers have the potential to make a dramatic contribution to the mission of Silverwood Park as a demonstration site for agricultural education.

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Silverwood's three vision statements are specific actions: Educate, Innovate and Produce. If the park is to truly fulfill these goals, conventional agricultural practices – monocultural and petroleum-based – will provide no innovation, limited production and very weak education. Our vision is to make Silverwood an agriculture education showplace, so we must start by repairing the most fundamental resource we possess: soil.

Silverwood Park is named as a key component in a stronger regional food system in the 2015 City of Madison staff report on the Public Market District concept plan. As a publicly owned demonstration farm, an organic Silverwood can play its role in promoting soil health, a more educated populace, a strong local economy and prepare our community for the uncertain future we all face with enormous climate change.

Dane County has a proud tradition of leading in many policy areas. For example, Governor Scott Walker is now supportive of manure digesters...an environmental tool this County endorsed long ago. In the areas of human services, criminal justice, and energy use, the County has also taken innovative approaches to problems. We believe it is therefore equally appropriate to provide positive examples in the area of agriculture, too.

Yesterday, Dane County UW-Extension announced a pilot program to incentivize organic certification in Dane County. Area farmers will be assisted with their efforts to change the paradigm and change our local food system. This will only happen if area residents understand why this change is so important. Silverwood Park can be part of that "teachable moment."

But this opportunity can only be realized by continuing the conversion of the additional 160 acres (approximately) to organic agriculture. It takes a minimum of three years without pesticide use to allow for the certification of land as organic. A profitable organic harvest takes even longer. Is there any reason to wait to convert the rest of this acreage?

FOSP believes the future of farming lies in a respectful relationship with the soils and landscapes upon which we live, recreate, educate and farm. We are ready to assist Dane County in gathering resources to make Silverwood a truly remarkable resource for agricultural innovation and education. Please help us do that.

We ask the Park Commission to make a clear commitment to expedite change at Silverwood and support the contracts for remaining lands to be offered as organic conversion in 2018. Please give serious consideration to endorsement of conversion to organic practice at Silverwood County Park in 2018.

Thank you very much for your service, and consideration of this request.

Sincerely, the Board of Directors of Friends of Silverwood Park, Inc.

Kirsten Almo, treasurer

Emily Halapatz, member

Kyle Richmond, president

John Steines, member

Cheri Trick, member

Katie Whitten, vice president