

Dane County Park Commission Remarks by Bill Lunney Chair

From the County's purchase of its first park in 1935, (82 years ago) the Park Commission has been an integral part of the growth and development of our Park system. The Park Commission was formed under state statutory authority to manage that first park and with further refinement by Statute and County Ordinances, has continued to assist in the planning and policies governing our system with over 15,000 acres, 25 recreation parks, 29 wildlife areas, three working farm parks, historic and archeological sites, 14 active Friends groups, with an annual visitorship of over 2 and one half million per year.

The Parks were totally managed by the Commission, when I was first on the County Board, 47 years ago. Then in 1970, the Commission hired professional staff and eventually with the change in county structure through "home rule," day to day management was shifted to the County Executive. However through state statute and county ordinance the broad authority to assist in policies and planning for park lands, and many other functions, continues with the Commission.

** Do you feel your committee is making a difference? Why or why not?* Yes, the Commission assists the professional staff and provides general shared oversight on planning and policy for the County Parks System. The Commission is a link between the public and the park system. We work closely with an extraordinarily dedicated and competent staff and routinely defer to their expertise in their management of this expansive system. The Commission particularly promotes volunteerism in our Parks that has grown to includes 14 friends groups and over 5000 volunteers supporting our Parks. The Commission recently spearheaded an effort to create the Friends of Dane County Parks Endowment and with a citizens committee has raised nearly \$380,000 in private dollars for a permanent self-sustaining fund to support the work of our Friends groups. Parks are an economic generator for the county, provide accessible options for health benefits through recreation and exercise, assist in clean water efforts, and provide a venue for nature education and scientific study.

** What could we do to improve communication between your committee and elected officials?* A few years ago, under EANR's leadership; Parks, Lakes and Watershed, and Land Conservation Committee implemented a program of quarterly joint meetings, with one of the four entities taking the lead. Additionally, we make recommendations on resolutions referred to the

Commission by the County Board and communicate with EANR and other committees as needed mostly through staff.

* *If you could make one change to your committee, what would it be?* Nothing major; we have a Commission member who serves on Lakes and Watershed and served in the past on Land Conservation Committee which enhances coordination.

* *What is the biggest struggle your committee has?* Over the years the County Board and County Executive have been very supportive of the Parks but still it is a challenge to do all the things we need with limited financial resources. The Commission continues to explore opportunities for new resources to support our free parks and create greater internal efficiencies for the park operations. We try to manage meetings in ways that allow for public input while being sensitive to staff's time.

* *What is the biggest accomplishment you have had in the past two years?* See answer to making a difference above. The Commission will continue providing guidance on our the next five year County Parks and Open Space Plan, guiding the master plan update at Mendota County Park and a site plan for Morton Forest and Park, enhancing the Parks Endowment, and implementing efforts at capacity building of Friends Groups and volunteers and providing a link between our parks system and the public. The County Parks system is more popular than ever and continues to grow to meet our community needs.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk you about our Parks system. Many believe it is the best County Park System in the State. Any questions ?