

Dane County Land & Water Resources Department
Comments on Vienna Pothole Conservation Concerns

The Vienna (Cty V) prairie pothole is ***one of Wisconsin's best examples*** of a highly functioning, dynamic pothole ecosystem. Prior to European settlement, the Empire Prairie region of Northern Dane and Southern Columbia counties once contained 100,000+ thousand acres of native prairie and wetland habitat similar to that currently found at Vienna Pothole or similarly at Goose Pond Natural Area in Arlington. These ecosystems are incredibly productive, dynamic and are exceptional habitat for nesting waterfowl and waterbirds, as well as providing important ecosystem services like groundwater infiltration and filtering.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service recognized the importance of these areas for waterfowl conservation and acquired scattered parcels in the Leopold Wetland Management District throughout the last century. Dane County Parks purchased the 81-acre Vienna Pothole Wildlife Area in 2019 to better protect the subject wetland and to develop and restore the upland habitat adjacent to the wetland in order to fully realize the site's conservation potential. This property is accessible to the public for hunting and recreation via a small parking lot located on the east side of Schumacher Road on the southern end of the property. The large pothole wetlands on the property offer excellent waterfowl hunting opportunities. The area also offers the potential for quality deer and turkey hunting.

Dane County Parks/Land & Water Resources Department is concerned about the re-zoning and development plans proposed adjacent to this important site for a number of reasons:

1. **Wetland/Ecosystem Function:** Pothole systems like those found at Vienna are dynamic over time and space and the plants and animals that utilize these systems have adapted to this natural water cycle. These systems are meant to go through high and low water years as they are fed by a combination of precipitation (runoff) and groundwater levels. A natural water cycle in these types of habitat could include high and low water periods both within a year and across years depending on precipitation events seasonally. During high water years animals like Yellow-headed Blackbirds, gallinules or grebes take advantage of the deeper water to set up breeding territories and exploit food-rich environments with reduced risk of predation by raccoons, skunks or mink. Higher water years provide quality brood-rearing habitat for nesting waterfowl and migratory habitat for these species in the fall. During lower water years the marsh dries out leading to a flush of seed-rich annual plants. When those annual plants are flooded by subsequent rainstorms they offer a bounty of food to macroinvertebrates and the migratory birds that are refueling for long journeys south or north seasonally.

Dane County's restoration plans at this site include converting adjacent cropland on public land to permanent grassland/prairie cover. This conversion will better filter run-off from adjacent farms and allow for better soil conservation, less nutrient loading in the wetlands and better groundwater infiltration. This opportunity also exists on adjacent private lands including the subject parcel of the proposed re-zone.

Changing the hydrology of these sites through development of impervious surfaces will impede the overall function of the site and lead to lower quality habitat development and less utility for

the wildlife that we are intending to protect. We shouldn't be looking at the Vienna Pothole as a stormwater retention basin, but rather as a high quality ecosystem worthy of protection.

2. **Wildlife/Bird Habitat:** Prairie potholes are highly productive ecologically and as such contain a number of native bird species that rely on these sites for both reproduction but also migration. ***215 species of birds*** have been documented at this site across all taxa. This site contains one of the most important nesting sites for Yellow-headed Blackbird, gallinule, coot, black tern, ruddy duck and other obligate marshbirds. In migration it can provide exceptional habitat for migratory waterfowl with daily counts over 1,000 individuals and during low water periods provides important stopover habitat for migratory shorebirds as they refuel back and forth from the arctic.

Upland grasslands/prairie are exceptionally important to nesting waterfowl as many species like mallard, blue-winged teal, shoveler and gadwall nest in adjacent grasslands and lead their recently hatched chicks to water. Dane County Parks intends to create nesting habitat in the next five years through upland restoration that should dramatically improve habitat for nesting waterfowl, sandhill cranes and turtles that all utilize uplands and wetlands during different phases of their lifecycle.

3. **Impacts to Recreation:** As Dane County continues to develop at rapid rates, opportunities for consumptive (hunting) and non-consumptive recreation (birdwatching, hiking, etc.) are limited. This despite demand increasing with increasing human population. The Vienna Pothole Wildlife Area was purchased with the intent to provide high quality hunting and birdwatching opportunities for the general public. Dane County is concerned that the re-zoning proposed would directly limit these activities due to safety and other sources of conflict. The proposed re-zone would also indirectly impact recreation through changes in habitat quality and extent and thus fewer waterfowl and a lower quality recreational experience.

Dane County urges the committee to consider the overall importance of this wetland to Wisconsin's wildlife and the recreational value of the property. Potholes like Vienna should not be thought of as stormwater basins, but rather afforded the protection required for their dynamic ecological function.