

## Understanding the Rouge Park Master Plan

*"The purpose of the design has been to preserve a beautiful natural environment - free from the rush and the sight of man's dominating influence. Here is to be preserved a natural landscape,"*

*-From the original design plan for Rouge Park, written in 1923 (the year Rouge Park was established)*

The design of this new Master Plan was driven by the vision and values expressed by members of the Rouge Park community including residents, neighborhood organizations, park user groups, and other stakeholders. The Friends of Rouge Park provided opportunities for input into the plan beginning with a Community Visioning Session held on May 18, 2011, and continuing over the last four years with monthly membership meetings and on our Facebook page. With a grant from the National Environmental Education Foundation, Lawrence Technological University was able to provide assistance in development of this plan.

Rouge Park has wandered far from the original vision articulated in the original 1923 design. There has been a strong consensus throughout the development of the plan that the park's most valuable asset is still its natural areas. The greatest concern has consistently been safety and security. These two themes have been the guiding principles in designing the plan.

The statement "Keep it natural" received the highest agreement as the top priority for Rouge Park at the 2011 Visioning Session and has continued to be so throughout the design period. The need for well-maintained recreational facilities for all ages has consistently been the second priority. To avoid conflict between these two values, we sought to concentrate recreational development into specific zones to allow the majority of the acreage in the park to remain in an undeveloped natural state.

During the many discussions with the LTU students and Professor Joong Subkim, the question of branding was often raised: How should "The Rouge Park Experience" be defined? What should be the symbol and theme of the park? Should it be a traffic thoroughfare park like Hines Drive or a destination park like Belle Isle? Keeping with the vision of the park as a place to experience Nature, the goal was to design Rouge Park as a destination park.

Currently, there are three distinct zones in the park: (1) Developed recreational areas. (2) Undeveloped natural areas (forests, prairie, wetlands), and (3) Expanses of mowed grass that serve neither as natural or recreational areas and are costly to keep mowed. Under the plan these areas would be converted to either recreational or natural areas, greatly increasing the forests and prairies in the park (see map above). Their are few areas with 360 degree natural vistas un-interrupted by views of human development (home's, school and businesses). Re-forestation, especially along the perimeter of the park, would improve the aesthetic character of the park as well as improving the quality and diversity of native plants and wildlife habitats, and provide for more efficient stormwater management. There has been broad consensus that recreational facilities be located in the interior of the park along Outer Drive and Spinoza Drive, and not in pocket parks along the perimeter.

With 14 road entrances, the park currently functions more as a thoroughfare park, with the vast majority of traffic using the park as a shortcut across the city, and only a small minority actually coming to use the park. Reducing the cut-through traffic would be a minimal inconvenience for motorists and have a positive impact on the character of the park for park visitors. Consequently, the plan calls for reducing the entrances from 14 to about 8 or 9. In addition to reducing the amount of traffic, reducing traffic speed through traffic calming (lane reductions, redesign for 25mph traffic, pedestrian crossings, etc.) would greatly improve the character of the park. Finally, the plan calls for eliminating curbside parking throughout the park and replacing it with designated parking areas at trailheads and recreational facilities. This addresses both the aesthetic and the security concerns by concentrating parking where it can be more easily patrolled and where garbage cans be placed and maintained.

Currently, the natural features of the park are poorly highlighted and difficult to access. The plan calls for making focal points of nature trails, wetlands, butterfly gardens, etc. by providing parking, signage,

information kiosks, picnic shelters, overlooks, etc. at these locations and to promote their use for nature appreciation and environmental education. A nature center in the Outer Drive and Tireman area will be the primary access point for the trail system (Stonebridge Nature trail, Prairie Pathway and Mountain Biking Trail).

## Recreation

Recreational development has been concentrated into two primary areas: Brennan Recreation Area and the Joy/Spinoza Recreational Area. These areas in the interior of the park will host large public events (festivals, concerts, etc.) and most sports activities. Smaller recreation areas along Outer Drive and Spinoza, also in the interior of the park will include playgrounds and picnic shelters enclosed by a paved walking path. Picnic shelters will be available for rent (with cleaning deposit) for family reunions and smaller community events. In addition, a walking trail with benches and trash cans will circle the perimeter of the park (where feasible) to encourage fitness, community interaction and to visually designate the park boundary.

## Security

There has also been near complete consensus that until security and safety are first firmly established in the park, no other developments should proceed. Improving security and safety must include both increased posting and enforcement of the laws and park rules, and building these into the design of the park itself. In addition to reducing and slowing traffic, concentrating recreational activities and parking in well-lit and well-patrolled areas will help reach this goal. In addition, attracting legitimate park users through developing a variety of park uses (walking trails, picnic/playground areas, sports facilities, etc.) will reduce the opportunities for undesirable activities to dominate.

## Branding and Promotion

The goal of the design is to make visitors to the park experience the park as a special and unique place. To this end, the design includes plans for distinctive and attractive entrances to the park resonating with the Nature theme, and the addition of a tall observation tower on the highest hill in the park at the northwest corner of Lahser and Joy Rd. This tower could become a "must visit" site for tourists visiting Detroit, or for weddings, with its views of the entire park with downtown Detroit and the Ambassador Bridge visible in the distance. Brochures could use the image of the tower as the symbol and branding of the park.

## Conclusion

The master plan seeks to redesign Rouge Park into highly valued urban amenity for the entire region. A combination of an expanse of preserved natural areas and clean, safe, well-financed, maintained and highly used recreational areas will make Rouge Park a destination for environmental education, nature appreciation, music and art festivals, summer and winter sports, 5K runs and other metropolitan wide events as well as daily use by the local community.