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TO: Honorable County Commissioners
Scott Arneson, County Administrator

FROM: Jess L. Greenwood, P.E. – Director / County Engineer

RE: 17 June 26 Budget Committee Meeting
Request to Proceed With Planned Park Projects

Date: 17 June 26

Summary

It is requested that the Budget Committee and the County Board authorize staff to proceed with several high priority park projects.

Background

The Goodhue County Parks, Trails, and Recreation Advisory Board (Park Board) met on 16 June 26. Commissioners that serve as representatives on the Park Board and County staff provided an update on budget discussions and potential cuts to park projects to achieve budgeting goals.

In consideration of upcoming budget challenges, the Park Board requested that the Commissioners consider the following park projects and proposed alternative funding:

1. Fish Cleaning Station - \$30,000 was included in the Capital Improvement Plan in 2024 to construct a fish cleaning station at Byllesby Park. Issues with people cleaning fish on picnic tables, on food serving counters, and in bathrooms is ongoing. This project was intended to prevent damage to the new pavilion, picnic tables, and the septic system. As staff further evaluated project feasibility, they found issues with disposal of the fish remains and discovered that a reliable fish cleaning station that would not require a high amount of staff mechanical maintenance, would cost approximately \$125,000 to construct. The project has been determined to be too expensive to construct and maintain at this time. Staff recommends that this project is postponed until more park staff is available to maintain a fish cleaning station (when a campground is developed, etc.) and grant funding can be applied for as part of a larger project, and reallocating these funds to the Park Host Site Project.
2. Park Host Sites - \$50,000 was included in the 2024 Capital Improvement Plan for design and construction of two park host sites at Byllesby Park. The future park hosts would be able to provide a variety of park services, depending upon whether the future positions were paid or unpaid:

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- Unpaid: around-the-clock supervision at the park, visitor services and wayfinding, picking up litter, and refilling toilet paper and sweeping out restrooms on busy days.
- Paid: all of the above services, with the addition of mowing, collecting garbages, and cleaning restrooms.

The construction of the park host sites would include paved campsites with full hookups (water, septic, and electrical connections), picnic tables, fire pits, privacy screening, tree and shrub plantings; and may include trail modifications for access to the sites and a small garden/storage shed if the County wishes to have paid park hosts which would require a UTV and storage of hand tools for additional tasks.

Staff requested quotes for civil and mechanical design services this spring, and the design services were estimated at \$36,500. As part of this design service, a proposal and construction plans would be prepared, as well as a construction estimate.

Beyond the initial investment of design and construction, minimal additional expenses would be incurred: wages if the County decides to have paid park hosts (for comparison, having Dakota County clean the restrooms last year was a cost of \$16,416 last year plus supplies), electricity for the two campsites, pumping of a small septic tank, wireless internet, and maintenance and replacement of a UTV if that is provided for the hosts.

The Park Board recommends authorizing staff to proceed with design of the park host sites in 2026 with the Capital funds that have been carried forward from 2024. The Park Board further recommends proceeding with construction of the park host sites in 2027, utilizing remaining Capital funds (approximately \$13,500 from this project), the \$30,000 from the fish cleaning station project, and park reserve funds.

Pursuing grant funding is not recommended for this project, as it requires maintaining the sites into perpetuity. Instead, an eventual goal would be to construct a campground on the eastern 25 acre site and create campground hosts within the new campground that could help provide supervision for the whole park. The old park host sites could be repurposed as food truck parking or caterer parking at that time.

3. Buffer Planting – as mentioned above, the Byllesby Park Master Plan calls for camping on the 25 acres to the east of the main park. In preparation for eventual campground development, staff has constructed a berm along Highway 19 to be planted with trees and shrubs that would provide a buffer and screening between the highway and the future campsites.

Planting this screening is an investment in the future – trees take time to grow and require care, watering, and fertilizing to become well established. Public Works has been able to allocate two seasonal student employees to be able to assist with park maintenance this year, which could include watering new plantings.

The berm could be seeded with a prairie seed mixture, planted with trees and shrubs, mulched around the plantings, and purchase totes and hoses for watering for approximately \$15,000-\$18,000 depending upon the size of the trees and shrubs that are planted. The Park Board recommends using 2026 operating budget funds to install the buffer plantings, and utilizing seasonal student employees to water and help establish the plantings.

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4. Playground Replacement – The hard structure playground at Byllesby Park was installed in 2007. This playground is what changed the face of the park and brought new visitors to the facility. Byllesby Park had become a place of vandalism (people would go as far as to take log chains and pull over the cement block pit toilet structures), theft, and using and selling drugs. When the new playground was installed, the park once again became a place for families to gather and pushed out most of the destructive park visitors. When the new pavilion was constructed, it was purposely located close to the playground to allow supervision of children while they play.

The playground is still an important and heavily used feature of the park, but it is starting to show its age. The playground manufacturer has cautioned that parts for the playground are no longer being manufactured, and it is only a matter of time before they will no longer be available.

The current playground is also not ADA compliant. Local parks and trails grants through the DNR are now requiring the facility requesting the funding to either be fully ADA compliant, or to have identified any issues in an ADA transition plan and to have projects that bring them into compliance defined, funded, and planned as part of their improvement program in the next 1-2 years. As Byllesby Park is designated as a regional park, these grant restrictions do not yet apply. However, the Greater MN Regional Parks & Trails Commission (GMRPTC) has been making an investment in providing webinars to educate regional park and trail authorities on accessibility and inclusivity. Regional park and trail ADA compliance requirements are likely not far behind those of local parks. Replacement of the current playground would trigger a need to bring the playground into ADA compliance, regardless of grant requirements.

Staff requested an estimate last year for playground structures to replace what currently exists for playground elements. The estimate came back at approximately \$250,000, which would include full poured in place rubber surfacing that would be ADA compliant. Playground prices usually increase about 5 percent per year, which would mean the following estimated inflation for coming years:

Year:	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029
Cost:	\$251,263	\$263,826	\$277,017	\$290,868	\$305,412

These costs were for a bare minimum number of elements to replace what we currently have. Staff had included \$320,000 for playground replacement in the 2027 Capital Improvement Plan to be able to explore increased accessibility and inclusivity, while still providing a fun and challenging adventure for all users.

GMRPTC is now offering grants for up to \$100,000 in funding for this type of project that brings a park feature into ADA compliance. The grant requires a 25% match in order to achieve maximum points for the grant application. Another new requirement is that the entire cost of the project (minus the requested grant funding) needs to be available at the time of the grant application – funds already raised or committed in the budget. The GMRPTC/Legacy Grant application process is quite lengthy. For example:

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- Grant applicants prepare a design and estimate for their project, and secure funding.
- Grant applications are due to GMRPTC towards the end of July each year.
- Applicants are notified in November or December if their project is being recommended for funding.
- Recommended projects go to the Minnesota Legislature for approval in the spring of the following year.
- Once approved, the applicant must enter into a contract with the MN DNR.
- Funds are available on July 1st or once the contract is in place, and are good for a three-year period. For example, a grant application in July of 2027 that is selected for funding would have a funding period of 01 Jul 2028 – 31 May 2031.

GMRPTC plans to recommend funding for \$100,000-\$250,000 in this project category each year, so grants are very competitive. (Cap for each project is \$100,000)

Other playground replacement funding sources may include the following:

- Some vendors have grant resource pages where organizations can apply for different grants for playground replacement.
- Other vendors offer grants (which can be more like discounts) if you commit to purchasing their equipment.
- A fundraising campaign would work towards securing private funding for the project. This would require staff time commitment, but may also help secure project funding by park visitors that live outside of Goodhue County.

The Park Board recommends authorizing staff to apply for a GMRPTC/Legacy grant in 2027. The Park Board further recommends authorizing use of the park reserve funds for the playground replacement, contingent upon being selected as a Legacy grant recipient.

This timeline would allow staff to work with vendors on design and quotes for playground replacement in 2026. After a preferred vendor is chosen and a budget amount is determined, staff could begin fundraising for matching funds and applying for other grants as the Board desires.

5. Entrance Road, Parking Lot, and Forest Stewardship – Nielsen Memorial Preserve is almost 90 acres of beautiful old growth forest just west of Kenyon that was primarily donated by Harold Nielsen for development of a County park. This park site is currently completely undeveloped, and an access road and parking are required for better access by staff for natural resources maintenance. The forest has also been experiencing some canopy loss during our drought and rainfall cycles the last couple years, which is perpetuating issues with invasive species.

The Park Board recommends using consultant funds in the 2026 park operating budget to prepare a forest stewardship plan. This plan will help guide park maintenance and natural resource protection, and will be vital to securing grant funding in the future.

The Park Board also recommends using the \$30,000 in funding that has been carried forward from the 2024 Capital Improvement Plan for designing this access road and parking lot at Nielsen Memorial Preserve. This will provide construction plans and an estimate of construction costs.

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Under this proposal, no additional funds (that have not already been levied for in prior years) would be required from the Capital Improvement Plan in 2027 for park projects.

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