



**KAREN LAUKKONEN**  
Lilac Way Enthusiast & Website Designer

[restorelilacway.com](http://restorelilacway.com)  
952.929.1242  
[karen@restorelilacway.com](mailto:karen@restorelilacway.com)



**DOCUMENTING** the history and seven historic parks of Lilac Way on Highway 100, from Robbinsdale to Edina

**SUPPORTING** restoration of Graeser Park and its rare beehive fireplace in Robbinsdale, MN

**ENCOURAGING** re-evaluation of Rock Island area on Minnetonka Blvd. in St. Louis Park for potential restoration

10.13.20

Thanks to everyone for spending their Saturday morning discussing plans for historic Graeser Park. Andrea and Jessica were well prepared to help the Robbinsdale group move things forward. Here are my notes, with editing improvements by Kristi Gibson.

I felt very positive about all the comments, especially Andrea's extensive research, her efforts to bring Graeser Park forward as a community involvement site and finding resources for repairs prior to transfer.

I will be sharing these notes with the key players of Robbinsdale Historical Society, Lions Club and GPRP. It will also be sent to Andrea and Jessica at MnDOT, and Marcia and Richard at the City. Please do not share it on social media, this is for internal review only — Thanks very much, Karen

#### Attendees

- Andrea Weber, MnDOT Historic Roadside Property Program Manager
- Jessica Oh, MnDOT Community Highway Sponsorship Program Director
- Marcia Glick, Robbinsdale City Manager
- Richard McCoy, Robbinsdale Public Works Director/City Engineer
- Colleen Patterson and Kent Brun, Robbinsdale Lions/Graeser Park Restoration & Preservation (GPRP)
- Jeannine McDonald, Robbinsdale Lions and enthusiastic Rock Garden volunteer
- Karen Laukkonen, Restore Lilac Way and volunteer note taker

#### Introductions/Agenda/Follow up

- Andrea: Senior Landscape Architect, working at MnDOT for two years
- Jessica: Background in housing and community non-profit organizations
- Richard: Potential for Public Works to maintain park and oversee continuing preservation work
- Marcia: City will work on progressing with transferring ownership; funding (\$180,000) set aside for many years, carrying forward into 2021
- Jeannine: Excited to works with MnDOT and City to keep the ball rolling
- Goals for today: Shared understanding of history and current status, start planning to go forward with restoration and preservation
- Follow up:
  - Meeting with Jeannine and Karen on Friday, October 23 at 2pm to walk the park, share insights, others may join in
  - Andrea is sending slide deck from meeting
  - Andrea will visit Robbinsdale Public Works garage soon to see salvageable materials
  - Repairs will be done before MnDOT transfers ownership to Robbinsdale.



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- Need to have discussions about expectations; meet onsite, do field work with small group
- All parties agree that Graeser Park is a gem, MnDOT representative said it “took her breath away;” MnDOT has “unfulfilled promises to replace what they removed”

### **Andrea Weber: Graeser Park history/overview**

- Thanks for all your investment and time, blood, sweat, and tears; MnDOT is grateful; you’ve put in a lot of work and we appreciate it.
- Loves history of park, reminds her of Chinese gardens, old English grottos, remarkable because out of character for Nichols, rock garden is a hidden gem, thanks to Lions for keeping the park in public eye so not forgotten
- There were periods of neglect, misunderstanding of what it was
- Hope is for park group to turn it around, get it stable, be part of Robbinsdale park system, FINISH IT (Note: new stormwater pond stays as required by law)
- Pulled out historic plans, not very detailed and a bit hard to read, scans of early printouts. Shared original 1941 “as built” landscape plan, which shows:
  - There were 444 trees, 126 shrubs, deciduous and conifers including junipers
  - There were three stone refuse containers, described as rectangular limestone with grate at bottom to burn trash (wouldn’t work now, we have too much plastic)
  - There were three table-type stone fireplaces, similar to flat picnic grills, like bench with notch and grill with coals underneath
  - There was an oven-type fireplace, beehive, only one in original location
  - There were 18 stone picnic tables, rock garden, bituminous and flagstone walks, stone curb along overlook wall
  - Dashed shapes on map show mass plantings of Vanhoutte Spirea (also called Bridal Veil) and Common Lilacs
  - There is no detailed info about rock garden in the 1941 “as built” documents
- As of 2001, one-third of trees were still original to the park; can someone identify those that are still original?
- There were no trees in original rock garden; there are now two “liability trees” that pose a tripping hazard
- Andrea hope to is looking to key out/plug in the trees on plan
- Colorado Blue Spruce were original (she had different species list)
- Trees on road were American Elm
- Trees included spruce varieties, jack pines, red cedar, arborvitaes, ash, poplars (no oaks or maples)
- Peonies were part of planting efforts on Highway 100, might be able to include those
- We have more research to do, but anything on original plant list is appropriate to plant now (but no mulberries)



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- 1999 Plan (before highway construction) shows overlook wall, parking, very typical Nichols design, pads/picnic tables, two stairs (one buried during West Broadway widening and bridge construction)
- Discontinue attempt to uncover stairway; layer of black landscape material is part of structural soil profile for road and can't be excavated without destabilization of the road; need to determine how to adjust paths, possibly salvage stone from stairs
- Graeser Park is not on National Register. The Historic Roadside Property Program started in 1996. A Graeser Park report was pulled in 1998. Unfortunately, the new Highway 100 project design was already underway before the study was published, so historic parks were not incorporated into Highway 100 project design
- The 1998 study has been used for that now; Andrea can now tell future highway projects to go around historic parks
- The 1998 report determined that whole Lilac Way core was a historic district, five park properties, culverts, walls eligible, a few were eligible individually as well. Graeser Park was eligible, but because of change in Trunk Highway 100, West Broadway widening and new bridge, increased bridge height, new storm water pond built, sound walls, it was clear in 2001 memo that the park would no longer be eligible
- After Highway 100 project started, all stone materials that had been removed from Lilac Way parks were taken to MnDOT facility in Golden Valley ("Beehive Graveyard"); materials were transferred to Robbinsdale Public Works in 2008

### **Marcia Glick and Richard McCoy, City of Robbinsdale status**

- Richard McCoy, Robbinsdale Public Works Director/City Engineer:
  - Staff could be mowing, could potentially be maintaining it, oversee what goes on; it is an interesting, unusual area, has potential to be restored to something unique, see how process with MnDOT and community groups goes
- Marcia Glick, Robbinsdale City Manager:
  - Has extensive photos taken in 2000, looked back at them recently, interesting to see what it looks like now versus what it was in 2000
  - Overgrowth happened in last 20 years; encouraged by Lions pulling back vegetation to see what is still there
- Richard: We have been carrying forward a placeholder of funds, do master planning with Marcia, capital works are planned 10 years in advance. Planning and identification of budget must also look at plan for all City parks
- City will work on progressing ownership (until it is absolutely not the LRT alignment). Is BNSF a possibility? (If it is, great; if not, OK) Until January 2021, working on putting introductory pieces in place
- Seeking agreement with volunteers, based on extent of what they want to commit, other than or in addition to what they have been doing so far



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- City has a gravel bed facility for producing plant species, affordable way to get species to save money; City Forester Stephan (Steve) Papiz is Commercial Pest applicator of herbicides and can be helpful
- City can participate, expects a multistep approach, if Andrea can add tables, fix beehive
- City has been hesitant to invest funds in park since City doesn't own it
- If ownership transfers, can consider more actions moving forward
- Stephan could provide tree inventory, not sure if his Robbinsdale tree inventory includes Graeser
- City will continue to do mowing and snow removal

### **Andrea Weber: MnDOT Update**

- Typically Historic Roadside Property Program only works on eligible sites, but Graeser Park has community involvement
- Andrea was required to set up project rankings a year ago to provide transparency; one of the criteria was community involvement
- Graeser Park has not yet been ranked; however **Andrea is bringing this one forward as a community involvement site, high urgency for transfer, getting budget authorized for repairs prior to transfer**
- The cost of repairs is not yet determined
- Goal: Do no harm - maintain existing materials, "repair over replace," new materials should not detract; do not create false history
- Graeser Park is not on the National Register of Historic Places, but MnDOT will follow the [Secretary of Interior standards](#) used for properties that are eligible for the National Historic Register; not required to use those standards here but if not used, there could be damage done
- Before conveyance, MnDOT "will replace what we removed," perform safety repairs, address gaps in sidewalk to meet ADA standards
- ADA group has looked at site, connecting to overlook, they were planning to do some work in 2025, but can be flexible to reschedule
- Typically while MnDOT owns a site, and when they know they are going to turn over a park, they do repairs, so as not to turn over a huge financial burden to the City
- MnDOT will try to do this as smaller project in 2021; once repairs are completed, the final step is to turn the park over to City
- Unsure of the scope of repairs to paths in the rock garden; might repair paths that have been pulled up by trees, don't know how much \$
- MnDOT repairs are not a full rehab of park; goal is to address unfulfilled commitments, safety and ADA, guiding features; not planning to reset pathways in picnic area
- MnDOT will replace some pads for tables (not 18, but will do some, and do them appropriately); once City has plans and specs more could be added



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- Beehive restoration was discussed – need to review of regarding safety; repairing beehive will be expensive; MnDOT is willing to do it, but another idea is to have the partners raise funds for beehive restoration as a focal point for potential donors/grants
- While MnDOT owns Graeser Park, can we add funds to their budget? Yes.
- Question: If we got three tables replaced, can all pads be replaced, make it usable for family, even if not with a table on it? Andrea: Only with salvage and reinstall, would not include any patterned concrete
- Once City gets title, MnDOT will convey easement to Robbinsdale
- Robbinsdale will own the park/land, except for storm water pond
- Once turned over to city, it will take a while to see money

#### **Jeannine McDonald: Work at Graeser so far**

- She is at the park three times a week during summers; in 2007 the group was mowing a bunch of paths, whole thing was buried; pulled dirt off, now looks like it is coming back; wants it to be enjoyed; many people visit, have asked “how did they make a park look old?”; they thought it was created to look like 1900s
- Wants to see something brought forward to the end, to take on the project as Lions, etc.
- Lots of “volunteer trees” now, early photos show pines, many trees are unsafe
- Don’t quit this, sees value of park, potential, there is a lot at stake here

#### **Jessica Oh: Partnership Program**

- Goal: Get plan set
- Will need to try to identify plants that could be in rock garden, might not be same as 1930s
- Work on adding trees at different types of events
- Goal is to use standards as if working on a historic-eligible site, guiding principles - do no harm, replacing things is last choice
- New materials should not detract from site, not create false history, do not use new stone or new table design, etc.
- Bring tables back - if restored use the same stone, mortar, etc., use same level of craftsmanship
- In order to do that, contract with specialized stonemasons with proven experience, they know how to hand mix mortar in relation to type of stone, etc.
- Having qualified professionals, historic architect, help with specification, work with qualified maintenance, Andrea and Steve Papiz
- Do a certain amount of work using own methods, qualified contractors, for stonework
- How to volunteer in interim: do what’s possible, partner on
- Jessica comes from a fundraising background, can advise
- Sponsorship Program: Outside groups invest in right of way, partnerships, honors state obligations
- Forms direct agreements with business, civic groups, nonprofits, etc.



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- Formalize landscaping, lots of ways to partner with groups, maintain it when MnDOT can't
- Graeser Park will “crack the door” for collaboration on a historic site, we would be the first one
- Need to know how to do safely, MnDOT obligations are protected, how to work with parties on historic sites, this is perfect project
- Partners lead the way, propose activities, have 90 to 180-day window for agreement approval
- Start with concept, site map, detailed analysis, what is partner proposing
- To Do List: quick inventory of maintenance activities on ongoing basis
- Can skip ahead to full proposal if that works
- She is committed to supporting our group, offer detailed consultation
- Many MnDOT experts will review the proposed plan - water, traffic, endangered species, etc., analyze
- Determine any adjustments that need to be made, could draft license to allow us to do activities (for example, fundraising, ‘Picnic Like it’s 1939’ events)
- MnDOT would meet with us, be on same page, check in on annual basis
- Leveraging point for us, MnDOT will invest in signs to recognize group
- Robbinsdale Lions could fundraise with their partners, could do a couple different sponsor acknowledge signs
- Partners pay for all costs, use Andrea’s technical assistance to advance with her license
- 2-5 years, can cancel once title transfer occurs
- Partners would submit plant specs plans, required license for application fertilizer, need to consult on tools, arborist can help with removal of trees, what is appropriate, strong rules on removing plants
- Partners must have \$2,000,000 commercial liability insurance. Question from Colleen: Is that for working all the time? Jessica: Yes, required for sponsorship license, bring together attorneys
- Consent and documentation process, no volunteers under age 12
- Partners should include level of educational, events, etc., assuming stewardship of site
- License drafting, whole process takes a few months
- Specifics of talking education versus events, covering language in program, parade permits, evoke, different from elements, would want to think about it include in license or MnDOT events permits (would like it to include Restore Lilac’s ‘Picnic Like it’s 1939’ event for potential fundraising)
- Include provisions about historical preservation standards, cannot remove rock, cannot add rock mulch, materials must uphold preservation standards
- Can negotiate on certain elements, get authorized way to do this
- Fundraising to restore beehive - contract methods, MnDOT can oversee approved contractors, we are the underwriters but MnDOT still oversees



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- If we wanted to fundraise \$50,000, for example, historic standards would go under Andrea's program, can facilitate
- Jessica: partners should look at guidance doc, she can share a sample of existing project

### Other ideas

- Karen: Opportunities to have groups sponsor a picnic table? (We were going to do 'Adopt-A-Bed' in Rock Island for families to maintain gardens)
- Jeannine: Add overnight lighting? No electricity, try solar light, in line with today, get off grid? Part of restoring beehive, walk grounds, point out what we see; wants to get volunteer hours back in spring; lots to give, none is money; wants to keep busy, see people down there, hear stories from families; visitors ask her, "Why do you get so dirty?"; keep it rolling, appreciate MnDOT and City, get huge partnership, keep it moving.
- If Lions are not nonprofit, consider insurance arrangement, protect personal assets
- Get short term permit to trim buckthorn, use 'magic juice,' put can on top, nail can, rots plant, should be done after first frost this fall, Lions hope to do that this fall