

## Winnemac Park Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

**Date:** Wednesday, August 13, 2025

**Time:** 6:15pm at Lincoln Square Tap Room

Note: due to location, not all details may be captured here due to noise and inability to hear all input and commentary.

**Voting members in attendance (8 total):** Tessa Groll, Claire Howard, Dave Miretzky, Deb Miretzky, Amy Williamson, Dave Cady, Anne Sylvan, Jacob Schuster

**Other meeting attendees ( total):** Kierstin Siegl, Jeff Borden, Amy Reeder, Mike Pavilon, Kim Miller, Joan Elias, Jon Woolwine, Josh Hoyt, Andy Hoffman

*All new attendees have all been added to our email list for meeting updates.*

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### **OPENING**

#### **Introduction and Call to Order**

- Call to order
- Agreed that a quorum was present
- We did not do introductions at the start of the meeting to announce titles or welcome new members.

#### **Approval of Minutes**

- June meeting minutes approved (June 2025)

#### **Approval of Agenda**

- August agenda unanimously approved (August 13, 2025)
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### **PARK SUPERVISOR REPORT**

*Lisa Ragucci was not present at this meeting*

### **COMMENTARY**

**Public Comment:** none

**Member Comment:** none

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### **TREASURER REPORT**

*This report was given by Jacob, Claire present, Dinnekar absent. WPAC will be transitioning the position to Claire Howard going forward.*

### **WFFA Line Item Report | Total Expenses for Winnemac Fourth for All (WFFA) 2025**

Supplies and Clean-up: **\$354.85**

Volunteer Expenses (t-shirts, orientation): **\$575.52**

Printing/Marketing: **\$980**

Portable Restrooms: **\$1,630**

Insurance: **\$260**

Full Moon Jam (including 2 workshops): **\$6,100**

Family Fourth participants (facepainting, card magic, balloon animals, etc): **\$1450**

**Total WFFA Expenses: \$11,400.37**

Current total of contributions to WPAC received (first half 2025): **\$15,489.20**

Current total available funds as of August 13, 2025: **\$4559.72**

As of August 13, 2025, the PAC has **\$1,450** in unpaid liabilities remaining from WFFA

## **OLD BUSINESS**

**WFFA:** Jake shared line item expenses (above). He said he believed the event was a huge success overall and we have a lot of support for continuing, and thanked everyone who participated in putting WFFA together. Given the amount that was raised (both WFFA-specific and general donations), we are in the black financially and have some cushion. There will be a vote as to whether to do a WFFA 2026 at the September meeting.

Jacob had a table destroyed at WFFA and requested reimbursement for \$90 from WPAC funds. A motion was made to reimburse him **\$90** of WPAC funds. Motion passed 7 yes, 1 no, 1 abstention.

### **WFFA problems identified by Jake:**

1. Continued fireworks that occur during WFFA despite being advertised as a firework-free event (see related public commentary below).
2. Bathrooms were improperly situated.
3. Lags in time of the events - we had more down time between 1 and 3 PM before Family Fourth began officially at 3 PM (see public commentary below)
4. Would like to see if we can get participation across the park and perhaps locate some Family Fourth vendors more broadly.
5. Full MoonJam brings a lot of energy and we want to incorporate that in more places during the event.
6. We had a great volunteer presence up until late afternoon, but Jake would like to see WPAC volunteers be more of a presence later in the evening, particularly FMJ ends and it's time to gather up tables/chairs/tents/etc. and clean up a bit.
7. Fundraising and contributions will need amplification.

**Public Commentary / Member commentary:**

- Amy raised some concerns about how big a percentage of donations go towards WFFA out of the general funds; it is important to ensure there is a distribution of funds that go to other activities and possible amenities, including continued maintenance of the natural areas.
- Dave C. suggested starting WFFA later than 10 AM; perhaps closer to noon. Is it better to start at a later time and have more events available versus having it be longer with more spread out activity?
- Claire said that it would be easier to obtain corporate donations as we have now continued our event for 2 years and have a larger platform to work from, greater buy-in, and tracked success.
- Jeff reported that people were asking where things were and thought it was critical to have a map to hand out to people.
- There was some discussion about possibly accommodating the fireworks but Dave M. pointed out that 1) FMJ must have performance space that is not compromised per their permit and contract, 2) fireworks are illegal in the state, and 3) if anyone was hurt in an area WPAC “sanctioned” we would potentially be liable. We recognize that some people enjoy the fireworks but also that WFFA seems to have resulted in an event that tends to mitigate the numbers from other parts of the city who used to drive to Winnemac to watch fireworks.

**Central Prairie Mowing (July 23):**

Jacob provided a timeline summary of contacts after the July 23 mowing through July 28 (see end of minutes for the report) between CPD Natural Areas personnel. The final decision is that their mowing plan is done for the remainder of the year. There are meetings planned to further discuss communications regarding mowing of the prairies with the head of our Natural Areas Committee, Amy Williamson, and other officials, including alderman Andre Vasquez.

Some PAC members suggested sending a gift certificate to the individual who executed the mow on our central prairie due to the abuse he was receiving; others thought this was inappropriate and unnecessary. It was noted that WPAC cannot control how individuals in the park act. Private individuals can contribute money to Claire if they choose to participate.

**Survey available for people to fill out about activity in our park:**

Deb created a survey after collecting feedback which includes questions about WFFA, volunteering, fundraising, and ways that neighbors currently use the park. She feels it is important to know what people are interested in and build up a volunteer force as we consider a third WFFA and also broaden our activities and advocacy. Right now we have no real data to work from and she would like to change that to know how to focus efforts and prioritize goals.

Suggested getting signage for the park with a QR for people who are walking through (*this would create an expenditure that needs to be voted on by the PAC*). Other methods of distribution would include posts on social media, our email list, the 40th ward email list, other organizations (block clubs, Chambers, neighborhood associations) social media.

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**COMMITTEE REPORTS**

## **Nature Committee**

**Amy Williamson and Jon Woolwine:** Amy has a meeting at the end of the month with Alderman Vazquez and possibly park district administration; the focus for these discussions will be on communication with the community rather than the impact of the mow. The initial goal is to try to establish productive communication lines and help CPD see the PAC and community as resources who deserve to be treated respectfully as stewards of the park/prairie.

We have one of the oldest natural areas in the city, deliberately planted and nearly 30 years old; this happened in another park two years ago (Garfield Park) and was devastating to their PAC; it does not appear that issues were addressed in this situation. Josh Hoyt suggested inviting Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and possibly other senior CPD administrators to Winnemac for a tour so they can see the park themselves. It was agreed that we needed to see what happens with the late August discussions.

### **Work Days**

Upcoming work day will be on:

Saturday, August 23, 2025: this will be a smaller group that focuses on gathering seeds for other parks

Saturday, August 30, 2025: a focus upon removing invasives (bindweed)

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**Performance Arts Committee:** Dave C. is working on getting an official report from Beth Wolf (of Midsommar Flight); however, Winnemac Park drew the biggest crowd in their history. They would love to continue to perform in Winnemac. Nights out in the park hosts the event and Midsommer does a lot of their own promotions. We did a lot of our own social media posts on the event which were very well received in local community groups and on opening weekend. Saturday's performance had an ASL offering which was very-well received.

Shakespeare's **Motley Crew** will perform Midsummer Mayhem in Winnemac Park

**Dates:** August 2, 3, 9, 10, 16, 17

**Time:** 6:00pm

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**Administrative Committee:** Jacob would like to re-form a committee that reviews, creates, and amends various PAC by-laws and procedures. The previous iteration was composed of Jacob, Manny and Dinnekar.

**Bathroom Committee:** Has been dormant and needs to be reconfigured.

Meeting adjourned approximately 7: 40 PM.

**Next Meeting:** September 17, 2025 at 6:15pm, location Amundsen High School library (enter Damen Ave. door)

*Minutes submitted by Tessa Groll, WPAC Secretary (filling in for Sarah Harping) with edits and inclusions from Deb Miretzky (WPAC Vice President)*

## **Basic Timeline of Mowing Event in Winnemac Park, Summer 2025**

July 21, 2025, ~1:30pm: Amy Williamson (park steward and chairperson of the PAC's Natural Areas Committee) and Lisa Ragucci (CPD supervisor) receive email from CPD notifying them that "select"

areas of Winnemac Park's natural areas are to be mowed. This email reads in full:

**\*\* begin email\*\***

Select areas of the Winnemac Park Natural Area will be mowed by the Natural Areas contractor in July of 2025. The restoration and improvement of native habitat is a long-term process that requires ongoing management. Mowing is a common management tool, particularly in the early years of a habitat restoration project. Mowing reduces the pressure of weeds, particularly annual and biennial species, that grow very quickly and can outcompete native perennial seedlings, which grows much more slowly. While mowing can be jarring to see, the overall goal is to increase the odds of success of native plants to improve the long-term ecological quality of an area.

**\*\* end email \*\***

*Neither Amy nor Lisa thought anything particularly out of the ordinary about this email because CPD often mows certain select areas of the prairie to control or maintain the natural areas.*

**July 22, 2025, 8:45am:** Amy Williamson responds to CPD, acknowledging receipt of the email and seeking clarification that "I am assuming that this mowing will be primarily in the two largest sections (1 & 2 on this map) where the goldenrod often gets out of control?" Amy Williamson attaches to this email with a roughly drawn map with suggestions for where CPD should mow in the natural areas to best control some of the invasive/rampant growth. CPD does not respond.

**July 23, 2025, approximately 8:45am:** A contractor arrives in the park with an industrial mower. He begins dismantling of the natural areas, starting with the western prairie. Quickly, the contractor is confronted by a number of angry neighbors. Some threaten the contractor or abuse him. The police are called. Two units respond and once they ascertain that the contractor is duly authorized by the CPD to perform his task, they leave. I personally approach the contractor to verify that he is authorized to mow the prairies and that this isn't a giant mistake. He verifies that he has confirmed his task with CPD multiple times. His task is to mow all the prairies to the ground. I spend the next 30 minutes trying to get anyone from CPD on the phone to confirm that the park's natural areas are to be dismantled, to no avail (numerous others, including Amy Williamson, are also desperately trying to seek clarity from CPD regarding what they are doing). During this same timeframe, the Alderperson is fielding numerous complaints from neighbors. In frustration, I write an extremely angry email to Maria Stone (CPD head of community relations) about the failure to communicate the mowing plan to the PAC or community at large. The contractor finishes mowing the western prairie but leaves after this portion of the mow is done. July 23, 2025, approximately 2:00pm: I receive a call from Maria Stone, who apologizes about the lack of communication regarding the mowing plan and assures me that the PAC will be properly notified in the future regarding future mows. She notifies me the prairies will be similarly culled next year at approximately the same time.

**July 23,-25, 2025:** PAC board begins internal deliberations over how to respond to community complaints and anger over the mowing plan; also agreement is reached that we should attempt to prevent further culling of the natural areas (particularly the eastern prairie) until further input from the community is heard and responded to by CPD.

**July 25, 2025, 2:45pm:** PAC provides its response to CPD in the form of an email to the head of CPD's natural areas. PAC proposes a three step framework for moving forward. That framework is copied below:

**\*\* Begin email \*\***

I propose a set of guidelines to prevent the above situation from repeating:

1. Clear notice about the what, why and when of actions taken by Park District on the natural

areas should be given to all relevant stakeholders well in advance.

All relevant stakeholders should be given advance notice by CPD of actions that significantly impact the park's natural areas. It's my understanding that a brief email was sent out two days prior to the event notifying Lisa and Amy that "select" areas of the prairie would be mowed. This email was insufficient, as it did not convey the degree of work that was to be performed and did not give us adequate time to understand what was happening. As a model for how major actions like these should be performed, I direct you to how CPD handles the controlled burns. These events are announced months in advance. Signs are posted in the park explaining why the actions are being taken and when they can be expected to occur. The Alderperson is notified and he assists with messaging to the community. This is the model that major actions affecting our natural areas should follow. We understand that CPD lacks advertising budget and manpower, and the PAC stands ready to assist with this (as all PACs should). We have monetary and volunteer resources available; we have clear lines of communication with the public; we are lucky to have an alderperson who is engaged and wants to be helpful and he can also provide this message to our community. With sufficient advance notice, we can work in concert to inform the public about actions taken by the CPD.

2. The broader strategic vision for the natural areas should be shared with the PAC.

The CPD should share its broader strategic vision and plan for Winnemac Park's natural areas with the PAC so we don't work at cross-purposes. The PAC itself has no idea what CPD is doing in the natural areas or its long term plan. Some of this information may be shared with Amy Williamson, the park's steward, but I don't know how much. One example of this tension is the recent work volunteers put into removing bindweed from the natural areas. If CPD's plan was to mow all the nature areas down to the ground, this effort was entirely wasted. In addition, the PAC recently spent hundreds of dollars to plant native seedlings in the nature areas. Under the CPD's mowing plan, this investment would also be effectively wasted. The PAC needs to know what CPD plans to do on a long term basis with the nature areas so we can work collaboratively with each other.

3. CPD should carefully reassess its mowing plan to determine whether it benefits the community at large. The CPD should then justify that plan with the PAC and the community prior to implementation.

It is our understanding that CPD's mowing plan for the nature areas was effectuated based on science and is ostensibly in line for best practices for these prairies. That being said, we have fielded a large number of complaints from neighbors and there are many people (including some of the members of the PAC) who believe the mowing plan is problematic because it fails to take into account many different factors besides simply the city's monetary investment in native seeds. These include:

a) Destruction of the native habitat and the creatures that live and breed it during the height of summer. An example of this pointed out by one of our volunteers is the cutting of the park's only stand of dogbane which is the only plant to support a particular beetle in the park. I observed large numbers of rabbits, birds, and other creatures fleeing from the industrial mower. Is the CPD's plan narrowly tailored such that its impact on the park's wildlife (which our community holds dear) is Minimized?

b) Enjoyment of the public. Does the mowing plan take into account the public's enjoyment of these nature spaces during the height of summer? Our park does not have a large number of amenities to enjoy like some of CPD's other properties. The nature spaces are our primary draw and the neighbors and community are passionate about them. Can the mowing plan be adjusted such that the nature areas are not plowed until later in the season, or does it have to be now? Can the mowing plan be adjusted so that the mowing of our nature areas is staggered so that the public can still enjoy some portion of them while they are available?

In assessing these factors, we would expect CPD to make a careful cost-benefit analysis of the impact the mowing plan has on the community and the park's biodiversity. We would then ask CPD to justify its decisions by explaining the science and reasoning behind its decision so that the PAC can then disseminate that to the public. The ideal method to do this is to host a member of the nature areas staff at one of our meetings to discuss the plan. We know that time and manpower are short, so an alternative method would be to schedule a zoom or phone meeting with the PAC's board, so that we can make a presentation to our members and the broader public on the CPD's decision.

**\*\* end email \*\***

**July 28, 2025:** Head of CPD's natural areas responds to the PAC's email, providing the following statement via email:

**\*\* begin email \*\***

The mowing at Winnemac was an adjustment to management based on native seed that was installed earlier this year. With a semi-dry spring, we did not see these seeds germinate as early as expected, so they got a late start and were not able to keep up with the rapid growth of the existing perennials. To give these seedlings a better chance at survival, we elected to mow the existing perennials to reduce competition and provide more sunlight, while also combatting some of the introduced species. With more space and resources to grow, the seedlings will have established enough growth to survive a winter season and the perennials will absolutely bounce back from mowing. The restoration and improvement of native habitat is a long-term process that requires ongoing management. Mowing is a common management tool, particularly when working to increase biodiversity and to allow native seeds to establish. Mowing reduces the pressure of weeds, particularly annual and biennial species, that grow very quickly and can outcompete native perennial seedlings, which grow much more slowly. While mowing can be jarring to see, the overall goal is to increase the odds of success of native plants to improve the long-term ecological quality of an area. The idea is to manage for long-term biodiversity over short-term aesthetics.

The Natural Areas team is striving to increase communications to inform the public prior to projects that involve such stark visible changes. We realize that communication didn't go out as efficiently and effectively and possible. We have made updates to make sure that we are communicating with a broader and accurate group of stakeholders moving forward.

My hope is that this work will speak for itself in a couple years' time as the prairie at Winnemac becomes an even higher quality ecological restoration than before and continues to be a centerpiece of the community's enjoyment of nature.

**\*\* end email \*\***

**July 29, 2025:** CPD's assistant director for conservation & engagement agrees to set up a call with the PAC to discuss the mowing.

**July 30, 2025:** Andre Vazquez (Alderperson for the 40th ward) agrees to set up a meeting with the CPD superintendent and various stakeholders including the PAC to discuss the mowing plan and similar future events. That meeting has not yet taken place or been scheduled, as of the drafting of this document.

**July 24-August 2, 2025:** Tessa Groll, with the assistance of Amy Williamson, drafts a prairie impact statement with documented evidence of substantial detrimental impact on the prairie and the various wildlife that relies on it.

**August 4, 2025:** I participate in a call with CPD's assistant director for conservation & engagement. Amy Williamson is also invited to the call but because of failures by CPD, she is not allowed in. The call summary is as follows:

**\*\* begin summary \*\***

1. Everyone agrees that there were serious communication failures in regards to CPD's mowing plan and we will work to rectify those for future events. In particular, Matthew agreed that Amy and CPD should speak/communicate so that they can be in greater coordination as far as work that needs to be done in the nature areas and plans by the CPD/volunteers to address it. Matthew agreed to start an email with various stakeholders to initiate this process. The PAC hopes to be more involved in the communications for Nature Area actions and we stand ready to facilitate it.

2. There is no plan by CPD to further mow Winnemac Park's nature areas. The mowing plan was consummated July 23 and no additional action is intended to be taken in the park to further cull the nature areas.

3. There is disagreement between CPD Nature Areas and Steward (and the majority of the PAC's board atm) over whether the mowing plan was necessary or overall beneficial for Winnemac Park. CPD's position is that the mow was necessary to constrain overgrowing/invasive species and to protect the city's investment in native seeds put down after the burn. In addition, the CPD believes that the mow's impact on the biodiversity and wildlife in Winnemac Park is minimal. The PAC/Steward's current position is that the mow substantially harmed that life and that the CPD did not take that into account. Members of the PAC (along with the steward) have prepared an environmental impact assessment which shows critical damage to a number of species. CPD has not reviewed that assessment but promises to review when we send it. We understand that there may be continuing disagreement between the parties over the value of the mow, but we hope at least that there can be an attempt at consensus.

**\*\* end summary \*\***