

# Memorandum

March 8, 2007

To: Des Moines City Council  
Polk County Board of Supervisors  
Polk County Conservation Board  
Blank Park Zoo Foundation

From: Zoo-Park Technical Committee:  
Pat Boddy, Director, Polk County Conservation  
Rick Clark, City Manager, City of Des Moines  
Terry Rich, CEO, Blank Park Zoo Foundation  
Mike Freilinger, Polk County Administrator  
Don Tripp, Director, Des Moines Park and Recreation Department

Re: Recommendations of the Zoo-Park Technical Committee

## **Background**

Over the past few months the Polk County Conservation Board has met in public session to discuss the request of the Zoo Foundation to acquire some or all of Fort Des Moines Park to accommodate an expansion of the current Zoo. Although there appears to be strong sentiment in support of the proposed Zoo expansion, there was significant public concern expressed about locating this expansion in a public park when open space remains at a premium in Iowa. As a result there has not been a clear direction on how to proceed forward.

## **Proposal Development**

Last week we decided to work together to see if we could devise a mutually acceptable agreement that would allow the Zoo expansion to go forward, while also addressing the needs of the Polk County Conservation Board. We believe that such an agreement has been prepared, in concept, and we ask that each of the four participating entities – The Polk County Conservation Board, the Polk County Board of Supervisors, the Des Moines City Council, and the Zoo Foundation – give this agreement your careful consideration. A copy of the agreement is attached.

## **Overview of Benefits**

It is our belief that this agreement, if adopted, has strong potential to create a significant zoo-park complex on Des Moines' Southside. Through synergisms that emerge from an expanded zoo adjacent to an outstanding park, the public will have enhanced opportunities to learn about both local and global conservation efforts, have a memorable zoo experience, and enjoy extended time in the great outdoors. (Note: Research on conservation education is clear – experiences in natural settings before age eleven are the best indicator of an individual's ability to develop a conservation ethic).

These amenities will all be available within an urban setting.

## **Proposal Outlined**

In essence, we recommend a land swap that allows the zoo to expand into Fort Des Moines Park and the Polk County Conservation Board to develop an adjacent park of potentially significant value that will have the goal of achieving an “oasis in an urban setting.” Some of the key objectives of this proposal include the following points:

1. Any transfer of land from the Fort Des Moines Park should be to the City of Des Moines rather than the Zoo foundation. This preserves the public ownership of the existing park land.
2. Only a portion of the Fort Des Moines Park necessary for the Zoo expansion should be transferred. As a result, approximately 50+ acres of the uniquely timbered portion of the Fort Des Moines Park would be retained by the Polk County Conservation Board.
3. The portion of the Fort Des Moines Park conveyed for Zoo purposes would be replaced with nearly neighboring land south of Southridge Mall, allowing for a park development adjacent to the zoo.
4. The Polk County Conservation Board will receive \$5 million in funds from the Zoo Foundation necessary to make improvements in their facilities on the southside of Des Moines.
5. The zoo and park will jointly design a gateway feature inviting zoo-goers to experience Fort Des Moines Park, thus establishing a valuable partnership and helping the public take full advantage of the amenities available at both facilities.
6. No transfer of land will occur until the Zoo foundation has obtained firm commitments for the \$25 million necessary to undertake the initial phase of improvement of the Zoo expansion.
7. And perhaps most importantly, the agreement contemplates that all the participating entities will work together to prepare a Master Plan for the development of the public spaces in the areas called the "superblock" which includes the Zoo, the Fort Des Moines Park (including the replacement park land), Blank Golf Course, Fort Des Moines Historic Area, and the Des Moines Public Schools. This Master Plan will ensure that all of the various elements are planned and improved in such a way as to create a unified, integrated, and mutually supportive development.

Following your approval of this conceptual agreement, the next step will be to create a legal agreement between the parties that details the provisions outlined here.

We offer this proposal in the spirit of developing a true “win-win” for the people and natural resources of Des Moines and Polk County.

Attachment

Zoo-Park Technical Committee:

Pat Boddy, Director  
Polk County Conservation

Richard Clark, City Manager  
City of Des Moines

Terry Rich, CEO  
Blank Park Zoo Foundation

Mike Freilinger  
Polk County Administrator

Don Tripp, Director  
Des Moines Park and Recreation Department

**An agreement between the City of Des Moines, Polk County Conservation Board, the Polk  
County Board of Supervisors,  
and the Blank Park Zoo Foundation  
concerning expansion of the Zoo into Fort Des Moines Park  
3-2-07**

This agreement outlines the roles and responsibilities of a Partnership for Conservation, Education, and Zoo Expansion. The partners are the City of Des Moines (city), the Blank Park Zoo Foundation (zoo), Polk County Supervisors (county), and Polk County/Conservation Board (PCCB).

The following agreement is recommended to the Des Moines City Council, the Blank Park Zoo Foundation, Polk County Board of Supervisors, and the Polk County Conservation Board from the technical team of representatives from PCCB, Des Moines Parks and Recreation staff, Blank Park Zoo staff, and the Des Moines City Manager. It is based upon support to encourage Blank Park Zoo expansion in south Des Moines while enhancing conservation education opportunities and continuing to protect and provide for green open space.

Under this agreement . . .

- The Blank Park Zoo Foundation shall raise or obtain commitments in the amount of \$25 million to be used for expansion of the Zoo at the Fort Des Moines Park, which will include a \$5 million fund for a new, Southside park, to be owned and managed by PCCB. No construction will occur in Fort Des Moines Park until the full \$25 million is raised or committed, and the fund established. This agreement terminates on July 31, 2008, if the Zoo Foundation does not secure funding.
- Upon written documentation provided by the Zoo that the aforementioned \$25 million is available, the Polk County Conservation Board shall transfer land as per Attachment A (approximately 60 acres including lake and dam) to the City of Des Moines to accommodate the expansion of the Zoo. The Zoo shall provide to PCCB land suitable for development as a park of about 60 acres in a location acceptable to the PCCB and in close proximity to the Ft DM Park. ,
- The Zoo and PCCB will jointly design a “Gateway Feature” to promote and encourage zoo-goers to exit the zoo to enjoy/use Fort Des Moines Park as part of the zoo experience.
- During development of the zoological park, design plans and construction will be coordinated with PCCB, and PCCB will be allowed first opportunity to acquire any trees proposed for removal from the original Fort Des Moines parklands prior to removal.
- The playground will be removed by the Zoo, and provided to PCCB for use within its park system.
- The Ft Des Moines Park land to be conveyed to the City for use by the Zoo shall include a conservation easement to be held by the PCCB (or other entity designated by the PCCB) to ensure no degradation of water quality at the lake, and to protect the oak/aspen area of the park.
- There will be a master planning project for the area public spaces known as the “superblock.” These areas currently make up the Blank Park Zoo, Fort Des Moines Park, Blank Park Golf Course, Fort Des Moines Historic areas, and Des Moines Public Schools. The PCCB will be included in this planning.