

William W. Powers State Recreation Area

Progress Report • Fall 2017



Illinois Department of Natural Resources

ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

William W. Powers State Recreation Area

Progress Report

Fall 2017

Introduction

William W. Powers State Recreation Area (Wm Powers) on Chicago's far southeast side attracts a half million visitors annually and is Illinois' gateway to Wolf Lake. But its impressive natural assets – which support rare and diverse coastal plant and animal species – have been often overshadowed by declining aesthetics and operations during the last 25 years. These challenges have affected usage and user perceptions of Wm Powers, and have hindered many visitors' interest in discovering and enjoying Wolf Lake's significance.



In 2015-2016, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) engaged The Lakota Group along with local partners and community members to develop the Wm Powers Park Enhancement Recommendations Plan. The IDNR Coastal Management Program underwrote and managed the planning initiative on behalf of the agency. Nearly 1,200 people helped prioritize improvements to enhance Wolf Lake's ecological assets and recreational amenities. The new plan recommended "do-able" site enhancements that balance community priorities with the financial and staffing constraints that IDNR faces with all its state parks.

The planning process resulted in a community-driven vision for an accessible and well-maintained site that supports mid-intensity recreation. The plan has since stimulated new enthusiasm and much needed changes at Wm Powers – from facility repairs to habitat management improvements.

Operations and Maintenance

Of the highest priorities identified by stakeholders in the 2015-2016 planning process, repairing and opening the washrooms was number one. IDNR completed this in spring 2017. The site now has 11 functional women's toilets and 11 men's toilets/urinals during park operating hours. IDNR also repaired and replaced lights in the flush toilet building,

painted the flush toilet building, and painted the pit-toilet facilities. The ADA-compliant women's and men's restrooms inside the Visitor Center (which has more limited hours of access) continue to function properly.

Many stakeholders also expressed frustration about the reduced hours of operation at Wm Powers. As a result, the interim site superintendent expanded park hours in 2017. It is now open 6 am to 8 pm April through September and 6 am to 6 pm October through March.

IDNR is in the process of addressing pothole issues. The agency is also planning road repairs, though it has not yet determined when those repairs will be financially feasible.

Habitat Management

IDNR removed about ten percent of trees in the day use area of the park because those trees had become hazardous. In addition, the US Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services division worked in partnership with IDNR to address tree damage from the beaver population. Wm Powers now boasts 107 new trees that Wm Powers site staff, with assistance from Cook County Forest Preserve staff and equipment, planted to replace the damaged and otherwise hazardous ones.

Funding from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative allowed IDNR to contract with Greencorps Chicago – a job training program for individuals with barriers to employment – to perform habitat restoration work at Wm Powers. Greencorps removed invasive species from 15 acres of wetlands and associated uplands, planted 40 lbs. of native seed, and established approximately 1,500 young native plants. Greencorps will be back in spring 2018 for one more retreatment of any invasive plants that come back. IDNR also developed a plan for additional work on Phragmites control that it will implement beginning this fall.



At IDNR's request, Illinois State Water Survey conducted a bathymetry study of Wolf Lake. This study, which measured the depth of the lake, will help IDNR make decisions on improving fish breeding grounds. It also provided data necessary for assessing if and where IDNR could create a hemi-marsh at Wm Powers.

Human Resources

Of the other highest priorities identified by stakeholders in the 2015-2016 planning process, a replacement for the retiring site superintendent at Wm Powers was number three. Levi Bray began as interim site superintendent in January 2017. Bray has been with IDNR for 28 years, and his prior experience includes more than a dozen years at Wm Powers.

IDNR also hired two seasonal site technicians in 2017. Their work has helped augment the capacity of permanent site technician Charles Sloan and office associate Terri Zovko. In addition, Sebrena Lewis joined the Wm Powers staff as conservation education representative.

Finally, IDNR restructured its senior management team for the lands division. New regional land manager Melinda Kitchens is now providing more immediate oversight of Wm Powers than was possible with the agency's previous land management leadership.

Additional noteworthy developments

The Wm Powers Park Enhancement Recommendations Plan provided a strong supporting case for Illinois Conservation Foundation's (ICF) June 2017 grant application to the Chi-Cal Rivers Fund. The proposed project is a partnership between ICF and IDNR to implement approximately \$300,000 in public use improvements at Wm Powers which were prioritized in 2016 by park users and other stakeholders – for example, shaded fishing pier, outdoor classroom, new entrance sign. The proposed improvements are contingent of course on the project being selected for funding. But regardless, ICF and IDNR will continue to pursue private and public grant opportunities to augment what IDNR can afford to take on within its internal budget limitations.

Stakeholders who participated in one or more of the public meetings and surveys related to the Wm Powers Park Enhancement Recommendations Plan were generally supportive of the proposed Wolf Lake Bi-state Trail. (This system would connect Hammond, Indiana and the Hegewisch neighborhood of Chicago, including three parks – Forest Preserves of Cook County's Eggers Grove, Hammond Port Authority's Wolf Lake Memorial Park, and IDNR's Wm Powers site.) IDNR has not committed to a timeline or pursuing funds for its portion of trail. The agency did however develop a map, summary narrative, and budget for the project in early 2017. These preliminary pieces will support IDNR's case for funding once the agency is able to prioritize next steps for trail development.

WTTW Channel 11 and The Nature Conservancy brought new public attention to Wm Powers. The Nature Conservancy published two stories on the site in summer 2017. WTTW featured Wm Powers on its August 17, 2017 broadcast of Chicago Tonight.



<https://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/illinois/howwe-work/william-powers-recreation-area-chicago.xml>

<https://blog.nature.org/conservancy/2017/07/17/stopping-to-see-the-forest-and-the-trees/>

<http://chicagotonight.wttw.com/2017/08/17/green-job-training-conservation-efforts-threatened-federal-cuts>

Closing remarks

An IDNR staff member received the following unsolicited testimonial in July 2017, just ten months after the Park Enhancement Recommendations Plan completion:

“I just wanted to tell you, and thank you for listening to [us about park management]. I cannot tell you how pleased the whole community is with the work [now being done at Wm Powers]. ...The park is really shaping up... and I tell you it is truly a night and day difference and it's these things that the community sees and appreciates ...maybe you can share this letter and let people know how happy we are now.”

IDNR is grateful to the Wm Powers site staff as well as other agency staff members and our conservation community partners who invested their time and talents in helping begin to realize the site's tremendous potential. IDNR is also grateful to the hundreds and hundreds of additional Wm Powers stakeholders and supporters who are committed to positive change at the park.

Special thanks to Levi Bray.

Written and designed by Suellen Burns, Senior Advisor - Urban Communities & Partnerships
Photography by Kim Kreiling, Natural Resource Specialist - Coastal Management Program