

June 12, 2003

Ann Arbor Park Advisory Commission
c/o Mr. Ron Olson, Superintendent
Parks and Recreation Department

We write you as the Executive officers representing Friends of Dicken Woods, a neighborhood group constituting over 150 members. We are requesting that the Park Advisory Commission table a final decision on this parcel pending further input and information from our group. We feel that this important decision, which has long lasting impact on the city, not be taken in haste. There are multiple cogent arguments as to why Dicken Woods lends itself to a joint public-private purchase. We understand that there has been a preliminary evaluation of this property from a limited set of criteria. We have collected a large body of information, commissioned an environmental analysis, and examined the West Area and PROS plans. Support for preserving Dicken Woods comes from the Malletts Creek Management Plan, the Allen Creek Restoration plan, the Huron River Watershed Council, founding members of the Allen Creek advisory group, and most importantly the PROS own plans.

These woods score exceedingly well based upon an evaluation using the criteria for the PROS plan from *Section C: Park and Recreation and System Wide goals* and *Section E: Land Use: Planning and Acquisition Principles*.

There are many reasons for preserving different kinds of open space, including frontier woodlands such as Dicken Woods. We further believe Dicken Woods has additional important qualities worth supporting and preserving. As a natural area with trails, Dicken Woods will serve as an invaluable resource for Dicken Elementary School allowing innovative curriculum development, as well as forming a neighborhood and city asset. This land also serves as a source of pride and an anchor for our tightly knit community.

I. Specific support for acquisition of Dicken Woods from Section E of the PROS Plan; Land Use: Planning and Acquisition Principles.

1. ***Huron River Frontage.*** No part of Dicken Woods has Huron River frontage. However, lying at the headwaters of the Allen and Mallet's Creeks that flow into the Huron, it has important ecological import and impact on this waterway.
2. ***Citywide system balance.*** Dicken Woods must rate very high. Las Vegas and Mushrooms parks are the only significant parks in our southwest area neighborhood. Both are one acre, and are designed for recreation. Their limited size all but precludes natural areas. Hansen Park is small, outside our contiguous neighborhood, and across two major streets.
3. ***Natural Resource Protection.*** Dicken Woods has been a de facto natural area for the neighborhood for over thirty years. The topography and slopes are well

documented, while the strength and diversity of the flora and fauna has been only partly appreciated. The city's own frog count attests to the quality of the wetlands. Expert environmental assessment has identified a vibrant variety of native species.

Grey dogwood, small American elm, and some hawthorn also occur within the areas of brush. In contrast, within the wooded area, there is a diversity of tree species, including white oak, red oak, American elm, silver maple, red maple, hop hornbeam, and white ash. Some old and dead apple trees also occur in the northwestern portion of the property.

Both the woodlands and the areas of brush support a variety of small mammals as well as considerable bird life. While walking the perimeter, the undersigned observed tracks of squirrels, cottontail rabbits, red fox, and even one track of white-tailed deer. In addition, the birds that were observed on site included blue jays, cardinals, black-capped chickadees, and mourning doves. Hence, even the areas of brush support considerable animal life, and provides important habitat for small mammals and birds. Thus, the characterization of the woodlands and/or brush areas as being of "low quality" is not supported by the field observations. Dr. Eugene Jaworski

These reports are in contradiction to the proposed development's claim that the area is largely low-grade woodlands and wetlands consisting of invasive species.

4. ***Environmental Enhancement.*** We are not aware of any environmental contamination on the property.
5. ***Open Space and Green Space Imagery/Aesthetics.*** Again, Dicken Woods scores high in this category. The property is faced on two sides by multiple family housing two to three stories tall. It is also very close to the busy commercial areas along Stadium Boulevard. The woods location at the busy corner of South Maple and Pauline provides welcome relief from the dense development in the area.
6. ***Enhance Access and Linkage.*** While Dicken Woods does not directly connect to any other city parks, it does connect with the 200' natural setback behind the Walden Hills condominiums, entailing approximately five acres. The condominium association will not develop this setback. The property is contiguous with a greenbelt ravine running behind the houses on South Maple as well as the acreage and woods of Dicken School. From an aerial photo, it is clear that this land is also contiguous with land owned by the church on South Maple, which provides corridor connection to South Maple Park thereby stretching one-half of a mile.

We are pursuing a linkage with the underused Hansen Park through this church property. This would greatly enhance the proposed Hansen Park-South Maple Park corridor. Finally, the presence of white tailed deer, and the occasional fox and coyote, is a testament to the property's importance as a traffic corridor for animals.

7. ***Appropriate to Adjacent Land Use.*** Dicken Woods could provide a critical link to the development of a west side corridor stretching from Dicken School to South Maple Parks. It also presents a natural extension of some small existing wetlands with boardwalks associated with Dicken School.
8. ***Protection of Watersheds and Water Quality.*** We would suggest that Dicken Woods scores an “A+.” The property is adjacent to the highest point in the city, and straddles the sensitive watersheds of both Malletts and Allen Creek. The importance of these creeks is well known, and any development of this property can only adversely affect both of them. We understand that the City’s Environmental Commission is dealing with city planning based upon watershed boundaries as opposed to arbitrary political boundaries. We suggest that these issues be included in property acquisition decisions.

Water quality issues downstream from this property include a sewer disconnect program to deal with inadequate sewer capacity. The results of this program are not yet known. (Please see later sections that also refer to specific applicable watershed management plans.)

9. ***Suitability for Intended Use.*** Not only is Dicken Woods the only remaining undeveloped parcel in the neighborhood, it already provides the natural habitat the area would otherwise lack. It also will ensure the availability of an undeveloped area where youth can explore and experience nature, engaging in Huck Finn adventures. Each of us can remember the joy of having some wild lands to explore in our youth.
10. ***Recreation Value.*** The property is neither suited nor expected to provide recreational uses such as large playing fields or swimming pools. However nature trails will provide a refuge from the urban environ. In addition, a portion of the land is well suited for a community garden providing this form of recreation.
11. ***Method of Acquisition/Direct Costs.*** The combination of an active, fund-raising organization, a willing seller, and the difficulty of the site’s commercial development all indicate an excellent value to the citizen’s of Ann Arbor.
12. ***Multiple Use Benefit.*** The property of Dicken Woods is most conducive to the uses associated with a natural area. These include environmental education, walking/running, community gardens, and simple aesthetic enjoyment. This will provide an enhanced hands-on learning laboratory for environmental and ecological explorations for the students of Dicken elementary.
13. ***Community Benefit.*** Preservation of Dicken Woods will impact any area of Ann Arbor associated with Allen Creek, Malletts Creek, and therefore the Huron River. It also provides a bastion of nature on the southwest side of the city to

balance other isolated natural areas such as Thurston Pond and the Scarlett-Mitchell Nature Area.

14. ***Provides for Future Needs/Anticipates Growth.*** The burgeoning commercial development along Oak Valley Drive and residential development on Scio Church is rapidly eliminating other open space/natural areas on the southwest side of Ann Arbor. There is extremely limited room for local growth within the city proper. There are no alternatives to replacing Dicken Woods. This is a parcel that would have been developed thirty years ago had it been in private or commercial ownership. It represents a fabulous opportunity to preserve land that should have been set aside when the area was originally developed.
15. ***Overall Cost/Benefit to Park System.*** The Dicken Woods site is exceptional in its accessibility to a crowded corner of Ann Arbor. Situated between tracts of large multiple family units and underserved single-family homes, the location of this natural area is ideal. It provides an excellent value per acre procured based upon the current price, as well as factoring in the willingness of the neighborhood to support over 10% of the purchase cost. In addition, we feel the purchase price is negotiable as the current asking price was for commercial development.
16. ***Long Term Development and Maintenance Costs.*** As a natural area, Dicken Woods would require minimal maintenance. We are eager to provide future support towards preservation. Friends of Dicken Woods have already made a ten year pledge to maintain the park through clean-ups and trail maintenance. We are also pursuing pro-bono planning of the park. The neighbors have already provided a clean-up, removing a pick-up load of trash including tires, chairs, mufflers, and twenty bags of urban debris.
17. ***Urgency for Acquisition.*** The owner of the property wishes to expedite its disposition and work with the city and our neighborhood association to procure this land.
18. ***Consistency with the PROS plan.*** The Friends of Dicken Woods support the Guiding Acquisition Principles of the PROS plan.

II. Specific support for Acquisition of Dicken Woods from Section C of the PROS Plan: Park and Recreation and System Wide goals

We offer the following references to stated system-wide goals from Section C of the PROS plan that also support this acquisition.

“Goal 1. Provide an efficient recreation and open space system, where all the components will complement each other in providing a broad spectrum of services that minimizes duplication.”

“Objectives

- a. Promote cooperation and resource sharing among the public agencies involved in providing recreation and open space (i.e., Ann Arbor Public Schools, City Parks Department...)*
- b. Plan, design, and build parks and facilities to support multiple functions within the limitations of the site or the proposed improvement. Such planning will result in greater use of the parks and facilities and maximize the benefit for the dollars spent.”*

Procurement of this property fits extraordinarily well with the first objective. Locating a natural area adjacent to a public school and near a dense urban area will maximize the usage, thereby supporting objective b.

“Goal 5. Foster the quality of life in Ann Arbor by paying particular attention to the park, recreation and open space system as a visual and functional resource.

Rationale

The park, recreation and open space system...these functions include visual image of the city, water retention and cleansing, air purification and cooling, wild plant reserves, and wildlife habitat, as well as havens for physical activity and mental recharge for people.

Objectives

- a. Recognize the importance of views along streets, parkways, buffer areas and greenways as integral components of visual resource planning.*
- b. Analyze and plan entrance corridors, gateway intersections and visible outside edges of the City so as to maintain and enhance the image of Ann Arbor.*
- e. Provide, where feasible, unstructured open space within the parks system and within individual parks.”*

Dicken Woods is a high profile natural area at a defining entry point to the city. Fifty years from now there will be no greenbelt surrounding Ann Arbor. The benefit of a natural area in this location will only increase with the continued development of the region.

“Goal 6. Assure citizens a voice in the decision-making process of the park, recreation and open space system, including acquisition, planning and development.

Rationale

The park, recreation and open space system exists to serve the Ann Arbor community. To assure that the system meets the needs of the people, the evaluation of services, assessment of the community and ongoing communication with the public is necessary. Involvement of citizen advisors and decision makers in the system is crucial to maintaining strong support by the community for the parks and recreation system.”

We wholeheartedly support civic involvement in the park acquisition process. The dedication and number of people that actively support Dicken Woods’ acquisition reveals the value of the property.

“Goal 7. Develop recreation programs, services and facilities after assessing changing trends and community needs.

- e. Develop environmental interpretive programs and activities.*
- f. Study the need for expanding outdoor recreation opportunities.*
- g. Study the desirability of multi-site community centers and schools as community learning centers.”*

South Maple has experienced extensive development of apartments and condominiums; Dicken Woods is the last stretch along this road. It would also lend itself to Geocaching, an activity supported by recent city decree.

“Goal 8. Appropriately utilize (while preserving and restoring) the Huron River and areas of natural, historical or architectural significance.

Rationale

The natural, historic and cultural resources in Ann Arbor are highly valued by the community. The park, recreation and open space system must be a responsible steward of the resources under its care and work with other agencies and the community to balance the use of these resources with their long-term preservation.

f. Improve water quality overall so the river could be declared swimmable.”

III. Support for Acquisition by the Mallet’s Creek Management Plan

The Mallett’s Creek Management Plan Also speaks to the preservation of areas such as Dicken Woods. This plan, which has been endorsed by numerous entities, asks the city to:

“Expand the goals of the Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces to include creek protection through creation of more non-turf area, increasing groundwater retention/detention facilities in public parks, reduction of impervious surfaces, expanded use of native species, maintenance of creek buffer areas....”

In addition, the plan also states:

“Ann Arbor parks can play a major role in protecting and improving the functionality of Mallett's Creek. We therefore propose a number of changes in park management policy: Expand the Parks goals by including parks as functional resources, in addition to visual resources. Functional uses include water retention and cleansing, air purification and cooling, wild plant reserves and wildlife habitat, in addition to their roles as resources for physical activity and mental recharge for people. Improving this aspect of the Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces system can involve purchases of high quality natural areas, expansion of the Natural Area Preservation program, and the creation of more non-turf areas in existing parks

Expand the Parks goal of protecting and improving the Huron River by including protection of its tributaries and the watershed land. Only by looking at the watershed more holistically can we hope to improve water quality.”

Procurement and protection of these important headwaters of Mallett’s and Allen Creeks will provide a direct and demonstrable benefit to the water quality of the Huron River.

IV. Support for Acquisition by Goal 9 of the PROS Plan

In closing, we reference Goal 9 of the PROS Plan in support of our efforts.

Goal 9: Enhance the Huron River and its tributaries as Ann Arbor’s most significant natural resource and a source of its domestic water supply. Park development and acquisition affecting the Huron River watershed should restore and preserve the Huron River and its tributaries, improve water quality, preserve wildlife habitat, manage stormwater, and enhance recreation opportunities.

Now that the property is no longer under contract for development, it is prime for acquisition. The Friends of Dicken Woods feel strongly that all appraisal criteria must be thoroughly evaluated. The Friends of Dicken Woods urge the Parks Acquisition Committee to review the benefits to the city park system that preservation of Dicken Woods will provide.

Save Dicken Woods.

Sincerely,

Erik Stalhandske, President
Naela Jenkins, Vice President
Tom Ivacko, Vice President
Jim Boyd, Secretary
Deb Norbotten, Treasurer