

June 6, 2020

To: City Plan Commission Members
City Council Members
Mayor Kabat

From: Chuck Lee, President
Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh

Re: CIP Budget Item # 551: Marsh Hydrological Study

The *Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh*, a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the La Crosse River Marsh, supports the CIP 2021-2025 budget item #551, “Marsh Hydrological Study.” We urge the City Plan Commission and the full City Council to support this proposal.

The La Crosse River Marsh includes over one thousand acres of wetland, wet meadow, floodplain forest, recreational trails, and is bisected by streets, railroad tracks, utility rights of way and the river. The marsh stores floodwater, traps sediment and pollutants that would otherwise flow directly into the Mississippi River, its trails are part of the recreational and commuting infrastructure of the city and it provides rich, biodiverse habitat for countless birds, mammals, and amphibians.

Yet the marsh is a challenged landscape. Trails, streets, and railroad tracks divide the marsh into a chain of cells, only poorly connected. In the past, it was more often seen as a development site than a prime natural area – half of the marsh has been filled since WWII. And as we have seen over the last several years climate change has visited our region with more and more devastating rainfalls, causing flooding, and leading to costly repairs and maintenance.

In this past year, the Friends of the Marsh has partnered with Parks, Recreation, and Forestry to identify a professional environmental services contractor to “Analyze, Design Changes, Prepare Work Plans and Estimates, and Oversee Construction to Restore and Maintain Wetland Hydrology, Recreational Trails, and Habitat” in the marsh. We have helped 1) identify priorities, 2) write a Request for Information, and then read and ranked the submissions, 3) write a Request for Proposals, and again read, ranked, and interviewed potential contractors. The Friends will continue to play an active, central role in this project as it proceeds.

Over the course of this multi-year project, we seek to restore the marsh to a resilient natural/urban landscape. Currently the city spends a lot of time, effort, and money fixing damage from extreme weather events. Restoring a more natural disturbance regime through targeted infrastructure changes, potential active water level management, and through restoring native vegetation, we are confident that a naturally resilient landscape

can be achieved. Clearly, while hydrology is the foundation of all wetland services, this project is multi-faceted. Specifically, the goals of this project include:

- Hydrology – improve hydraulic connectivity throughout the river/marsh system within the city to improve water flows and when necessary, increase flood storage or facilitate drawdowns to enhance wetland habitat
- Recreation Trails – maintain a safe, high quality recreational (walk/bike) and commuting trail system
- Habitat – build upon and maintain biodiversity and native vegetation with habitat as the primary objective

This cannot happen overnight. It cannot happen without professional environmental assistance. It cannot happen without your support. This five-year project is a good start restoring a vital landscape that lies at the heart of our city.

(This statement represents the unanimous recommendation of the Board of Directors of the *Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh*. Chuck Lee, President, John Sullivan, Treasurer, Nancy Heerens-Knudson, Secretary, Karen Acker, Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins, Ralph Knudson, and Casey Meehan)