



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION *for*
OLMSTED
PARKS

April 17, 2011

Adam Schwerner
Director, Department of Natural Resources
Chicago Park District
541 North Fairbanks
Chicago, IL 60611

Dear Mr. Schwerner:

On behalf of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), I am writing to express NAOP's serious concern over the apparent lack of historical research regarding the proposed "Washington Park, Section 506 Ecological Restoration Project" in Chicago.

From the limited information that NAOP has been able to access—the Army Corps of Engineers project drawings—it seems that the plan for the southern end of Washington Park, as provided, shows no evidence of consideration of the design intent by Frederick Law Olmsted, or use of historical documents to inform the proposed changes. In addition, the plan drawings show no attention to the fact that the entire area, as planned by Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, was a discrete, coherent section, the *Upper Plaisance*, intended to provide a variety of activities and landscape experiences.

Consequently, the plan currently under consideration by the Chicago Park District does not utilize best practices and methodology applied over the last twenty years by parks departments in numerous Olmsted cities, carrying out thorough historical analysis as a first step in planning restoration.

Principal cities that have undertaken this work include New York City, especially with Central Park in Manhattan and Prospect Park in Brooklyn; Boston, MA, with the Emerald Necklace park system; Louisville, KY; Rochester, NY; Atlanta, GA; and Essex County, NJ, especially with Branch Brook Park.

The methodology of gathering and analyzing historical documents, plans and photographs as a basic element of restoring historic parks has been carried out in many cities by landscape architects, park departments, and non-profits that manage and maintain Olmsted parks. In many cases, documentation now is comprehensive and readily available in agency archives, through the Olmsted archives at Fairsted, the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park Service, and through decades of scholarly research made available through the Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted Project.

Best examples of thorough plans for restoration and maintenance of water bodies in Olmsted parks, some already having led to planting, include:

- The Boston Back Bay Fens and the Muddy River, including extensive historical analysis and master plans in the mid-1980s, followed by detailed planting plans for the current dredging of those waterways, which is just finally beginning;
- Plans for waterways of Branch Brook Park, NJ, which have led to the planting of sections of the shore of the lake there;

- Plantings for Trout Pond in Seneca Park, Rochester, NY;
- the Ravine in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, planned from historical photos and plans; and
- the Lake in Central Park, NY.

It should be recognized that Washington Park, with its water bodies, is not a natural area, but a designed and constructed landscape with clear purpose in terms of scenery, landscape experience, and variety of park uses. This must be considered by the Chicago Park District, instead of an ecologically driven "restoration" that is not a restoration of the original park at all."

During his long career, Olmsted defined what the profession of landscape architecture in the United States would be, and designed and oversaw construction of crucially influential examples of his art. In all, Olmsted and his firm carried out more than five hundred commissions from 1857-1895, among them many of the world's most important urban parks. He dominated the profession of landscape architecture during this period with especially significant influence in the field of public park design.

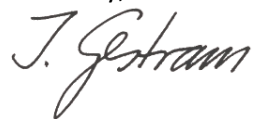
In Chicago, Olmsted contributed major examples of his work, designing the largest park of his career—the South Park—conceiving it as the great metropolitan park of the region with a range of landscapes and functions that made it virtually a park system in itself.

We ask the Chicago Park District to respect, preserve and improve its invaluable and significant legacy of historic parks and landscapes designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. NAOP requests that the Chicago Park District undertake a thorough and careful study of the historic design intent, following established practices and methodology, before proceeding further with the proposed "Washington Park, Section 506 Ecological Restoration Project."

The National Association for Olmsted Parks would be glad to provide assistance in terms of locating historical materials and resources; recommending qualified and experienced landscape architects and historic consultants specializing in the work of the Olmsted firm; and in a review and advisory capacity if desired by the Chicago Park District.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Chicago Park District plans for Washington Park.

Sincerely,



Iris Gestram
Executive Director

cc: Anne Haaker, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency
Gerald W. Adelman, President & CEO, Openlands
Erma Tranter, President, Friends of the Parks
Victoria Post Ranney

Established in 1980, the National Association for Olmsted Parks advances Olmsted principles and the legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people's lives. It is the only national organization solely dedicated to preserving the Olmsted legacy by providing the advocacy, research and outreach needed to protect, restore and maintain these exemplary parks and landscapes, particularly in urban areas.