

POSITION PAPER: PROPOSED FOREST PARK MASTER PLAN
Board of the Lake Forest Foundation for Historic Preservation
March 23, 2010

Since 1976 the Lake Forest Preservation Foundation has worked with the City and its citizens to preserve the integrity and excellence of our community's historic architecture and landscape architecture. To fulfill our mission, we work to educate, advocate, protect, and fund the preservation of Lake Forest's historic visual character.

The Preservation Foundation strongly shares the Lake Forest Garden Club's commitment to provide clear direction to guide short- and long-term decisions by the City's Parks and Recreation Department regarding the management and development of the Forest Park landscape. We commend the Garden Club's gift of a conceptual Master Plan to rehabilitate this historic park as a valuable first step toward this goal. Commendable, also, is the Garden Club's commitment to work with the community to privately fund the approved rehabilitation of the Park. Representatives of the Preservation Foundation have followed the development of the Master Plan closely. We agree that the Park needs a controlling hand and a well-reasoned program of improvements. We do have questions about aspects of the proposed Plan, which we have shared with the Garden Club.

Forest Park, as you know, dates back to an 1857 plan for Lake Forest by Almerin Hotchkiss. Fifty years later, circa 1900, Ossian Cole (O.C.) Simonds, a noted landscape gardener with a nationwide reputation and a founding member of the American Society of Landscape Architects, was recruited to "restore the landscape and its trees" [City, 1/2010]. The result was "Forest Park," a landscape that has received the Nation's highest honor by being included in the Lake Forest National Register District of the National Register of Historic Places.

The Park is a "Cultural Landscape," as defined by the National Park Service. That means it was (a) consciously sited (by Almerin Hotchkiss); (b) with restoration designed by a landscape architect (O.C. Simonds); (c) is associated with significant persons (Almerin Hotchkiss and O.C. Simonds), and (d) illustrates important aspects in the history of landscape architecture (pioneer landscape preservation and the dawn of the Prairie style of landscape gardening and design).

The City owns the Hotchkiss 1857 plan and Simonds' original plan for the park, although it has not determined how much of Simonds' design was actually implemented. Lake Forest takes great pride in its O.C. Simonds'-designed landscapes, on private properties, as well as the Lake Forest College campus (1892); the land-marked Lake Forest Cemetery; and Fort Sheridan (c. 1895), where he employed "a technique called 'broad view,'" much like his plan for Forest Park—"irregular masses of trees and shrubs to create an indefinite border that made the open space of the parade grounds seem to extend beyond its boundaries." [Dretske, 2004].

Following our study of the March 23, 2010, revision of the Master Plan, the Preservation Foundation Board would like to offer four suggestions for your consideration.

1. **The Vision of the proposed Master Plan** should convey Lake Forest's strong commitment to preserving its historic visual character. We recommend that the Vision be restated to emphasize the importance of creating a long-range plan that recognizes the community's commitment to long-range stewardship of the vision of Hotchkiss and the work of O.C. Simonds in creating this historic "Cultural Landscape" and their commitment to respect for natural systems. The current Vision states: "The Master Plan serves as a long-range plan for the restoration, enhancement, and preservation of Forest Park." We recommend:

The Master Plan serves as a comprehensive plan to guide future decisions about Forest Park, using O.C. Simonds' landscape gardening philosophies and his and Hotchkiss's respect for natural systems, as the organizing framework for rehabilitating the park's landscape.

With this Vision as a guide, the 15 Goals to “Restore,” “Enhance,” and “Preserve” are placed in an historical context for future decision making and mandated to be guided by principles to ensure that what is done will work now and 100 years from now.

2. **The Bluff Walk** of the proposed Master Plan replaces O.C. Simonds’ carriage road, now an asphalt-paved “Ring Road” that violates the City’s Steep Slope ordinance. It is our understanding that a desire to remove cars from the core of the Park drove the proposal for a pedestrian path located west of Simonds’ carriage road and the current road. We are concerned that this change of use (not change of position) will result in surrounding streets, such as Lake Road, Deer Path, Spring Lane, and Mayflower, becoming a new “Ring Road,” increasing neighborhood traffic, and precluding efficient Rec-Department bus transportation to beach activities. We suggest a traffic study to test this possibility by closing the Ring Road for a meaningful, busy period in Summer 2010. Should this study identify traffic issues, consideration should be given to a plan for a pervious carriage road that can be well drained, secure the bluff, and accommodate managed flow-through vehicle traffic and drop-offs, but no parking.
3. **Vistas** illustrated in the proposed Master Plan are more open and numerous than in Simonds’ plan. In Simonds’ historic park, vistas are fewer and move through “rooms” of vegetation that may at times interrupt the vista, only to reveal it a few feet ahead. We suggest that the vistas be compatible with Simonds’ original intent and be re-examined before the Design Development phase is entered.
4. **Other Items Need Clarification, including:** (a) Why has a north parking lot been removed from the overview layout, yet remains as an option in the proposed Plan?; (b) How is drainage to be dealt with to mitigate bluff erosion?; (c) What specific plant materials are to be used on the bluff and table land and where?; (d) How many trees are to come down on the bluff and where?; and (e) How much re-grading and contouring of bluff and table land is required to accommodate the stone benches, and what will be its historic visual impact?

We believe that the City’s reputation for excellence will remain secure by adhering to the principle on which all groups agree: *Preserving our historic visual character is paramount.* Rehabilitation of Forest Park by employing as guiding principles Hotchkiss’s vision, O.C. Simonds’ philosophies and design, and the Department of the Interior’s Standards for Cultural Landscapes now and in the future will help ensure that result. We look forward to working with the Garden Club, the City, and fellow citizens to achieve this objective. As planning progresses, we would welcome the opportunity to share research and the work of historians who focus on the work of O.C. Simonds with whom we have consulted.