Report to the City of St. Cloud Regarding Site 124 (Heritage Park)

by

Stephen Saupe, PhD.
Biology Department
College of St. Benedict/St. John’s University
Collegeville, MN 56321
ssaupe@csbsju.edu; 320.262.2782

Introduction: In accordance with Section 4.2, of the St. Cloud Environmentally Sensitive Areas Ordinance (ESAO) 1871, this report provides a brief scientific assessment of the planned development of Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) 124 – Heritage Park. The guiding principle of this report is based on the goals of the ordinance, which are to “provide and encourage measures of protection” (Article 2. Section 1.1-1) for ESA’s while providing an “equitable economic return” (Article 2. Section 1.1-2) and supporting “orderly growth” (Article 2. Section 2.1). The Ordinance further states that development should be “guided by a concern to protect, conserve and enhance these resources (Article 2. Section 3.1).”

I am familiar with Site 124. Over the years, I have walked through the Park many times, though admittedly, I have not done so in more than a dozen years. To re-familiarize myself with the site, I visited on November 21, 2017. I spent approximately an hour. During my visit, I walked through the entire parcel, took photographs, and recorded notes.

Site Description/Observations
Site 124 is owned by the City of St. Cloud. It is a roughly 19-acre parcel located near the intersection of Highway 15 and Second Street South, across from Holiday Inn and Walmart (Fig.’s 1, 5). It is perhaps the only remaining remnant of forest on the west side of the City in the downtown area. The original field survey by Short Elliott Hendrickson Inc. (SEH) in 1995 recognized the low hardwood and marsh communities present on this site (see Fig’s. 2 & 4). However, they considered it a low priority site and gave it a low grade – D.

The site has not improved in the years since the SEH survey. There are many mature trees growing on the site including northern red oak (Quercus rubra), bur oak (Quercus macrocarpa), white oak (Quercus alba), pin oak (Q. ellipsoidalis), green ash (Fraxinus pennsylvanica), black ash (F. nigra), and black cherry (Prunus serotina, Fig. 2). Unfortunately, the site is overrun with European buckthorn (Rhamnus cathartica; Fig. 4). Few forbs were observed other than carrion-flower (Smilax sp.) and black snakeroot (Sanicula sp.). The lack of herbs is probably due to both the dense cover of European buckthorn as well as the fact that most plants were dormant when I visited. Wildlife observed during my visit included red and gray squirrels and a number of bird species (i.e., black-capped chickadees, mallards). Many of the birds were observed around feeding stations had someone had set up in the forest.

The forest has suffered from human disturbance. Perhaps reflecting both its downtown location and heavy use, litter is scattered throughout the site. There is also damage created by campers; in fact, on the day of my visit I observed two tents and two individuals camping just north of the Museum complex.
In summary, Site 124 is a relatively low quality forest community (grade D) that serves as wildlife habitat and acts as a buffer to the wetland/aquatic areas on the eastern side of the property (Fig. 4). It would take a considerable effort to restore the community to a higher grade/quality. The site is isolated from other nearby forest complexes.

**Development Proposal**
I received copies of the preliminary and final plats for this site on December 13, 2017. No specific details about the proposed development of the site were shown on the plats, with the exception that two roads/entrances to the property are platted – one to the west side of the property (37th Ave.) and the other approximately in the middle of the parcel (35th Ave.).

The EDT Committee convened on December 14, 2017. At this meeting, we learned that the site was going to be used for a commercial development and would include parking for 800 vehicles. No additional details about the proposed development were provided to the EDT team at the time. A week later (December 21, 2017), the *St. Cloud Times* published a story, “Costco Proposed for Heritage Park Land.”

In short, it appears that the City of St. Cloud (also the property developer) will sell ESA #124 for a commercial development that will remove the existing natural community. In exchange, we learned at the EDT meeting that the City/Developer proposes to use the sale price of Site 124 to purchase and preserve two parcels (Friedrich Property – 19 acres; Talahi Woods – 26 acres). The *St. Cloud Times* article quoted Mayor Dave Kleis as saying the funds would be used to purchase “two city parks, as well as provide money for neighborhood parks.” The article also stated that “at least $1 million of the sale price of the land will go into the city’s park maintenance fund.”

**Recommendation / Assessment**
As noted above, the EDT process is designed to both support growth while protecting and conserving ESA’s. High priority sites should receive more protection than lower priority sites (*Article 5. Section 4.1*) like ESA124. However, development should maximize protection of both these areas (*5.4.2-1*), provide an equitable economic return (*5.4.2-2*), maintain an adequate buffer (*5.4.2-5*), and minimize adverse construction impacts (*5.4.2-6*).

I assume the Concept Plan (*Article 6.3.5*) for this project is to convert the entire site to a commercial development. Thus, any of the “design, placement and construction techniques used in [low priority sites like this one] to enhance the general ambiance and character of the natural area (*Article 5. Section 4.1-2.3*)” are likely not applicable. I further assume that Concept Plan is to essentially swap this site for two other natural areas.

On a positive note, this proposal will increase the amount and the quality of protected land in the City by 26 acres. The Talahi Parcel is also an ESA (120) and was listed by SEH as higher quality than the Heritage Site. Though I do not think the Friedrich’s parcel was listed in the original Natural Areas Inventory it is adjacent to, and will provide a good buffer to, a large complex of ESA’s (121, 125, 126). Though it will be a shame to see the loss of the Heritage Park site, the proposal offers protection to two other sites, of greater acreage, and which are both higher quality. This is good news and is compatible with the management tools and incentives cited in the Ordinance to provide economic return in consideration of protection and preservation of ESA’s (*Article 6 Section 3.6-1 & 2*).
The City/Developer should think very carefully about applying the proceeds from the sale of this ESA (#124) for neighborhood parks or general city park maintenance as referenced in the St. Cloud Times. Neighborhood parks, which I interpret as ball fields, playgrounds and other areas with manicured lawns and picnic areas, are not equivalent to an ESA. Using the funds for anything other than ESA acquisition and management may violate the intent of the Ordinance and could set a precedent that might be used by others planning to develop ESA’s. The City’s proposed Costco development should be a model for how the Ordinance should work to protect the limited ESA’s remaining while providing an equitable economic return.

Though I have not seen any development/management plan for the site to be able to offer specific recommendations for how the site is developed, one thing is clear. The final Costco development should include some sort of buffer and/or rain garden to provide protection to the ponds and wetlands on the west side of the property.

Date: December 29, 2017
Figure 1. Aerial view of Site 124, Heritage Park, St. Cloud (MN). North is to the left side of the map.
Figure 2. Black cherry and forest scene, Heritage Park, St. Cloud (MN). Image taken November 26, 2017.

Figure 3. European buckthorn at Heritage Park, St. Cloud (MN). Image taken November 26, 2017.
Figure 4. View of Heritage Park, St. Cloud (MN) from the west edge of the site. The Stearns County History Museum is in the background. Image taken November 26, 2017.
Figure 5. Heritage Park Plat provided by the City of St. Cloud