

Mill Creek Park: Turning a Liability into an Asset

by Paul Evanoff, ASLA &
Allison Bishop, Community Development Manager, Village of
Dexter

*The Phase 1 Enhancements Plan
illustrates proposed improvements
such as a boardwalk, flood plain
improvements, kayak launch sites,
trails and pedestrian plaza spaces.*

Overview

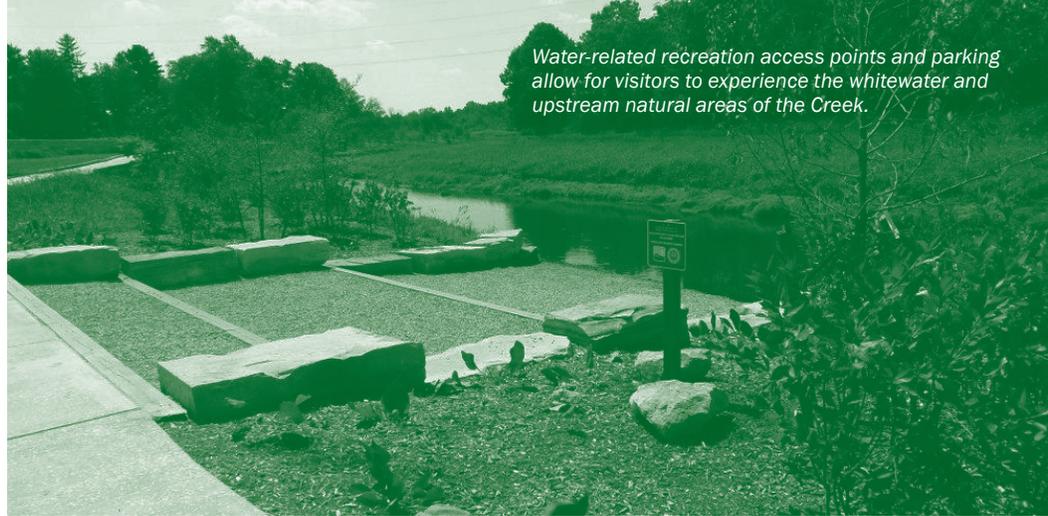
Mill Creek Park is a 56 acre linear park (27 acres owned by the Village of Dexter and 29 acres owned by the Dexter Community Schools) established by the Village of Dexter in 2008 as a result of the Mill Pond dam removal. The park consists of a large natural system including Mill Creek, its tributary and contiguous floodplain, wetlands, and forest vegetation.

The Village of Dexter is located 8 miles west of the City of Ann Arbor in the northwestern portion of Washtenaw County. The Village sits at the intersection of four (4) townships, Scio Township, Dexter Township, Webster Township and Lima Township and is bordered by the Mill Creek and Huron River.

Planning for the park began in 2000 as part of a feasibility study that was prepared to replace the aging Main Street bridge which serves as the major east/west artery through the village. The concrete dam that formed the Mill Pond impoundment was in similar condition to the bridge. Dams at the current site extend back to the 1820's when Samuel Dexter built the first saw and grist mills at the site. Village officials came to the decision to not replace the dam. Instead, they recognized the benefit to the community through its removal and the restoration of the impoundment area in a manner that would embrace the creek as an ecological, recreational, and economic asset.

The development of the park allows the Village to:

- Restore and protect the Mill Creek and its



Water-related recreation access points and parking allow for visitors to experience the whitewater and upstream natural areas of the Creek.

watershed consistent with today's best practices of system stewardship.

- Select, develop, and enhance site appropriate land and water based passive and low-impact active recreation opportunities.
- Develop the park as a trail system hub and a link to adjacent recreation areas and community assets.
- Build on "Dexter as a Destination" promotional efforts and stimulate additional economic activity.
- Foster community development through collaborative planning amongst Village, township, county, regional, and state commissions,

authorities, agencies and stakeholders.

In 2009, the Village of Dexter approved the Recreation Master Plan for the newly established Mill Creek Park (Master Plan). The Villages' long term plans are to develop the entire park with a system of pathways, land and water based park amenities, gathering and entertainment spaces, habitat and ecological restoration areas, and interpretive opportunities not typical of most downtowns.

Development of the Park is also a unique opportunity to turn a formerly inaccessible impoundment area into a local and regional destination and trailhead for the many regional trails planned for the area. The long range plan is

continued on page 10

also to connect the trail with other trail networks planned by Scio Township to the south and Washtenaw County and Huron Clinton Metropolitan Area (HCMA) to the north and east. Within the Village's trail network there will be almost 2 miles of trails that will connect with over 15 miles of contiguous trail, not including Washtenaw County's Border to Border Trail (B2B), which when completed, will add another 25+ miles of trail.

Master Plan Components

Creek Stabilization and Resource Restoration:

Immediately following removal of the dam, the stream channel and riparian environment of Mill Creek underwent significant changes. The channel was actively seeking its natural channel geometry through the 10 foot deep legacy sediments trapped behind the dam. Habitat diversity was limited by the removal of open water, high sediment transport, and prevalent invasive species.

Restored features introduced into the Master Plan include: Natural stream channel restoration, riparian vegetation establishment, steep slope stabilization, excavations to restore open water and emergent wetlands areas lost following dam removal, in-stream habitat structures, invasive species eradication and native seeding to improve species diversity. Consideration was also given to the placement of storm water management features (including treatment wetlands) at existing storm outlets to remove suspended sediments



The boardwalk through Mill Creek Park provides experiences through the various habitats surrounding the Creek. Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission implemented the boardwalk and railroad underpass connecting the Park to the residential subdivision and HCMA property to the north and west.

and filter out pollutants prior to discharge to the creek. The Plan also called for these areas to be used as interpretive opportunities to educate the public on best management practices. The Master Plan incorporates habitat enhancements within the storm water treatment areas, which are enhanced wetlands that provide habitat for many species of wildlife, particularly unique species of birds. Proposed fishing and observation decks will provide tremendous opportunities to view wildlife up and down stream, including viewing of a wetland south of the Phase 1 project area.

Water-Based Recreation:

Water-based recreation opportunities include kayaking and canoeing, fishing, wildlife viewing and environmental education and will become an expanded form of recreation to the Village that is in great demand and does not currently exist. Water-related recreation access points and parking will also allow for non-residents to visit the Village and experience the whitewater and upstream natural areas of the Creek.

During construction of the new Main Street bridge and removal of the dam, a series of terraced rock structures were installed in the vicinity of the original dam to provide fish passage while minimizing the extent of upstream headcutting. The rapids associated with these structures restrict canoe passage while providing a unique whitewater experience in southeast Michigan for kayaking. The Village anticipates that this could be an attraction to kayaking enthusiasts and a regional destination.

Right: The rapids restrict canoe passage but provide a unique whitewater experience in southeast Michigan for kayaking. The Village anticipates that this could be an attraction to kayaking enthusiasts and a regional destination.

...fishing, paddle sports, hiking, biking, nature observation, and environmental interpretation all in the immediate vicinity of the downtown.



The dam removal also allows for improved boating access to the Huron River which is a significant canoeing and kayaking resource in the region. Conversely, Huron River paddlers will access the Creek and the Village downtown for enjoyment of the Village ambiance and explore the upstream areas of the Creek. The Master Plan identified recreational opportunities for fishing, paddle sports, hiking, biking, nature observation, and environmental interpretation all in the immediate vicinity of the downtown.

Land-Based Recreation:

The proximity of the park to the downtown and adjacent DDA district provided a unique opportunity to integrate passive land-based recreation that will promote economic

development in the Village. The DDA Master Plan recognized the park as a key amenity to their plans for mixed use development that will occupy the vacant land and industrial uses that once occupied this area to the east. The village also envisions the park to draw visitors to the downtown shops and restaurants and provide for entertainment venues throughout the year.

Balancing resource restoration with urban related, land-based recreation created unique opportunities and challenges since much of the area set aside for these types of opportunities occur along the 20 foot bluffs that separate the floodplain from the downtown.

The Master Plan responded to these challenges by embracing the steep slopes in a way that allowed them to become park amenities. A meandering accessible path was developed to connect the floodplain to the downtown, a natural stone amphitheater was sited within the slopes for programmed special events, plaza's developed along the adjacent Jeffords Street for gathering places to view the valley and floodplain and stage groups touring the site, 4-season plantings and boulder outcroppings and native planting were identified as appropriate treatments on the excessively steep slopes. The portion of the park adjacent to the DDA planned, mixed use development also allows for townhouses and business to front directly onto the park.

continued on page 12

MILL CREEK PARK: TURNING A LIABILITY INTO AN ASSET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

Regional Trail Context:

Mill Creek Park provides a centrally located access point to miles of regional trail and provides a destination for starting and ending this recreation experience. The Park and trail development are at the center of multiple regional trail initiatives along the Mill Creek and Huron River. Currently HCMA maintains approximately 6 miles of trail north of the Village at the Hudson Mills Metropark and plans to construct approximately 3 miles south to connect their existing trail network through the Village and to the 25 mile long Washtenaw County B2B trail.

Public Input

The overall planning process occurred over an 18-month duration. During this period, the Village coordinated multiple consultants, engaged a steering committee, conducted two public forums, worked closely with the Village Parks and Recreation Department, Village Council, DDA, Dexter School District, HCMA, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission and others.

Public support for the development of the Mill Creek Park has been very positive. The Master Plan was presented at a public meeting and has received overwhelming support and approval.

Phasing

Phase 1:

Between 2010 and today, a considerable amount of capital improvements have been implemented.

During the summer of 2011, three separate projects were underway that focused on the urban core areas of the Master Plan's identified as priority 1 improvements.

Specifically, Washtenaw County Parks and Recreation Commission implemented the boardwalk and railroad underpass connecting the Park to the residential subdivision and HCMA property to the north and west. This non-motorized system will be extended approximately 3 miles northward to Hudson Mills in 2013.

Work under the both a Trust Fund Grant and a Waterways Grant focused on the downtown improvements immediately south of the Main Street Bridge in the former impoundment area between the Mill Creek and Jeffords Street. Improvements included:

- Land-Based Recreation: The Downtown riverwalk situated at the top of the bluff including pedestrian plaza areas, connecting sidewalks, historic lighting, an amphitheater and performance plaza, stone walls, an accessible concrete ramp connecting the downtown to the lower floodplain and landscape.

- Habitat Restoration: Floodplain work including stable stream channel geometry, creek habitat and grade control structures, establishment of riparian buffers, stormwater treatment wetlands, floodplain modifications, interpretive signage, native seeding and species control.

- Water-Based Recreation: Along the shoreline of the Creek, amenities included 2 canoe/kayak launch sites, boardwalks, fishing platforms, trails, an observation platform, parking improvements and interpretive signage.

Phase 2:

Phase two of the park development will include construction of the remaining non-motorized / shared use pathway for a distance of approximately 1.7 miles south Grand Street to Shield Road where it will connect to the Dexter Community School pathway. Riparian buffer improvements, stream bank stabilization, habitat restoration, stormwater management improvements, an observation tower, and interpretive signage will also be constructed to highlight the unique habitats and ecosystems.

The creation of Mill Creek Park and the implementation of phase one improvements have turned what was originally perceived as a liability into an asset for the Village and residents of western Washtenaw County. Village officials are committed to keeping the project moving forward and are actively planning programming opportunities for the park and seeking funding to advance phase two. ■

For more information contact:

Paul Evanoff, ASLA, SmithGroupJJR
734-669-2706

Allison Bishop, Community Development Manager,
Village of Dexter

734-426-8303

Images: SmithGroupJJR