

Gordon Park Restoration Plan

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Restoration acknowledges damage, makes it visible, and attempts repair.

It is not about where to be, but how to act.

-Wild by Design, Laura J. Martin

We acknowledge in Milwaukee that we are on traditional Potawatomi, Ho-Chunk and Menominee homeland along the southwest shores of Michigami, North America's largest system of freshwater lakes, where the Milwaukee, Menominee and Kinnickinnic rivers meet and the people of Wisconsin's sovereign Anishinaabe, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Oneida and Mohican nations remain present.

Land acknowledgement provided by Electa Quinney Institute

Introduction to Gordon Park

This plan is centered around the community surrounding Gordon Park with a focus on habitat continuity, revitalization, and improved public engagement. The Milwaukee river is an area of high concern with many public and private stakeholders involved. These partners have worked to create the Milwaukee River Greenway master plan, an overarching vision for the possibilities of the Milwaukee Greenway corridor. Building on the proposed work to be done, I give several suggestions as to how to implement goals expressed in the Greenway Plan as well as my own ideas on how to improve the area.

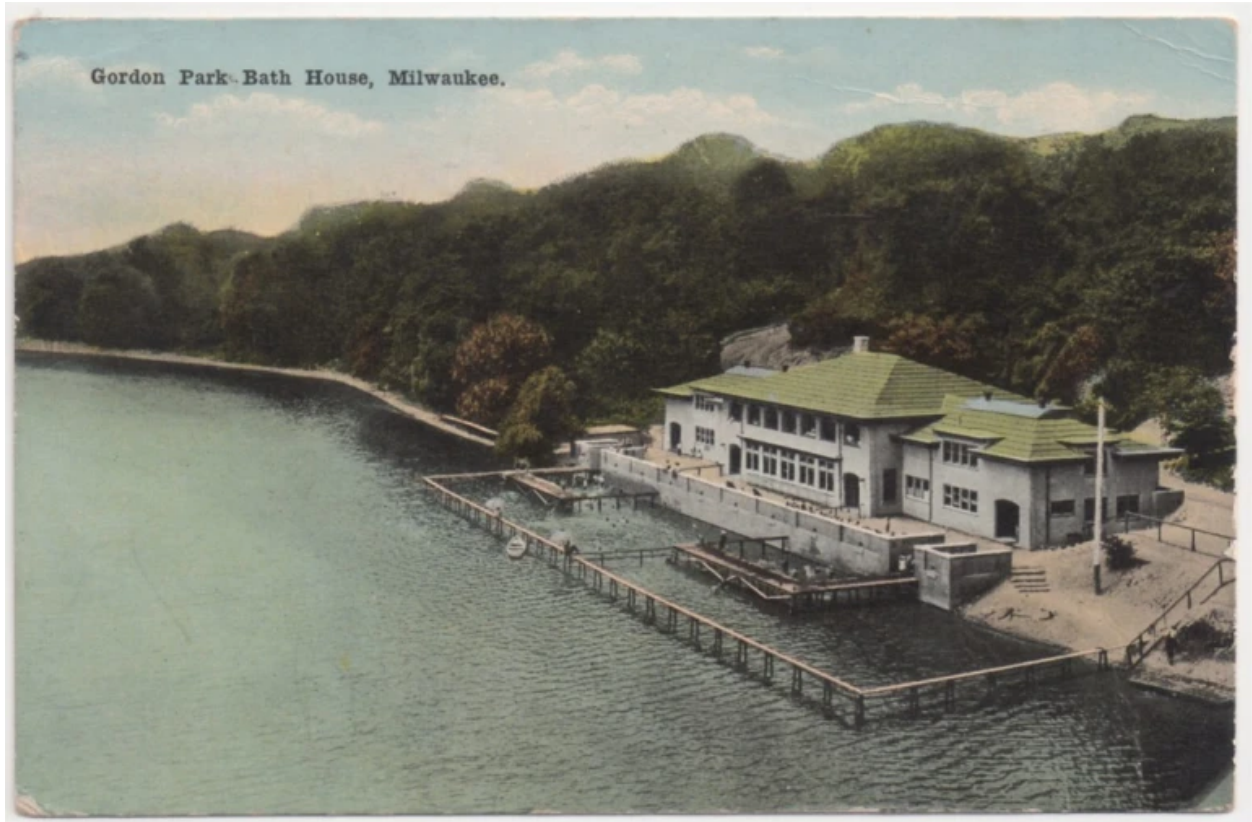
The Past to the Present

This site is bordered by two high traffic streets and the park itself has facilities that draw a lot of visitors. There is a paved path that runs along the former Beer Line Railway. Prior disruptions to the site include the ruins from the Wisconsin Lakes Ice House which caught on fire in 1911 as well as other industrial waste that has made its way into the soil from surrounding industrial shipping operations. The ruins from the fire that destroyed the facility still persists in the topography of the site. The Ice House sat on top of the bluff and had a loading dock connecting to the Beer Line Railway, formerly an important shipping corridor for industries in Milwaukee.



Wisconsin Lakes Ice & Cartage Co. operated several Milwaukee River icehouses in the late 1800s to early 1900s, including a five-story-high 350 x 100-foot structure at the foot of Center Street in Riverwest. It is shown in yellow in this illustration. Illustration by Carl Swanson

In the floodplain terrace below Gordon Park, a swimming area was constructed in 1909 along the river that served the community until the late 1930s, the retaining wall of which is still visible today and is a part of the landscape in the existing floodplain. Eventually pollution levels in the river caused the swimming area to close and the WPA program provided funds for a pool and bathhouse to be constructed on top of the bluff. This served until the late 90's when it was demolished and the current facilities were installed. Now the park has a building, a splash pad and playground, as well as the paved trail constructed on the former railway.



Postcard collection of Carl Swanson

Present and Possible Future

Currently, there is a large presence of invasive Reed Canary Grass in the floodplain terrace as well as non-native Phragmites, Thistle, and Burdock. Trees include a few large willows near the retaining wall that are producing suckers as well as small willows along the river edge. Box elder is also present. Adjacent to the floodplain there are a good amount of native species on the riparian edge and in the forested area moving up the bluff. There is a paved footpath from the parking lot and pavilion of Gordon Park down to the floodplain and the area under the Locust Street bridge. From there many footpaths travel along the river and also along the top of the bluff. These paths are used by many people in the area to find some level of immersion in nature even in the middle of a busy city. My plan's ecological trajectories work together with succession, using the existing conditions to work towards a trajectory from an invasive floodplain to wet-mesic prairie and shrub carr.



Showing invasive exotic species Reed Canary Grass and Canada Thistle in the Floodplain, Photo: Dan Collins



DNR, example of healthy Shrub-Carr Community. Photo: Joshua G. Cohen

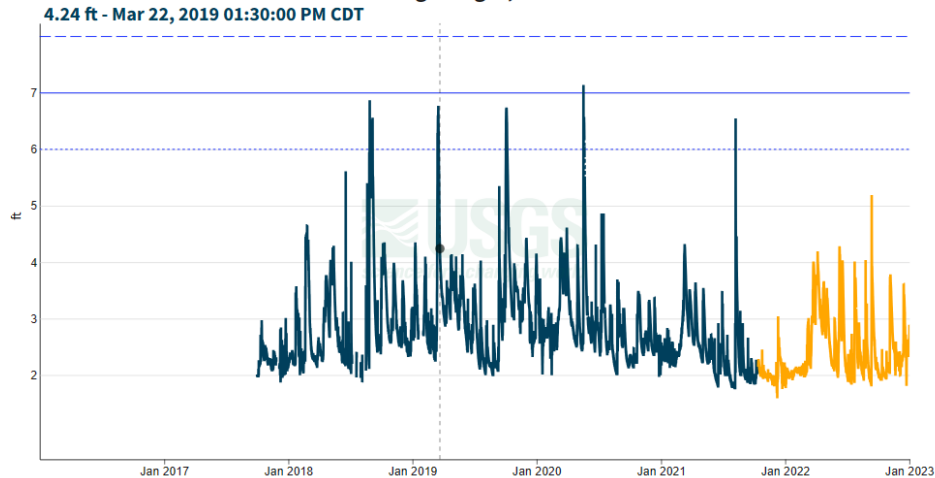
The How

Invasive plants are a priority in my plan because they are halting the process of succession to a future state. Reed Canary Grass is very dense but I think the tarping method could further the work done by organizations along the river. The Hydrograph from USGS suggests that even during flashy river events (rapid rise and fall of water height) of several feet within 24 hours, the river terrace on the West bank, south of Locust is not likely to be scoured and could support a combination of riparian shrubs, sedge meadow forbs and graminoids.

Milwaukee River at Milwaukee, WI - 04087000

January 1, 2016 - January 1, 2023

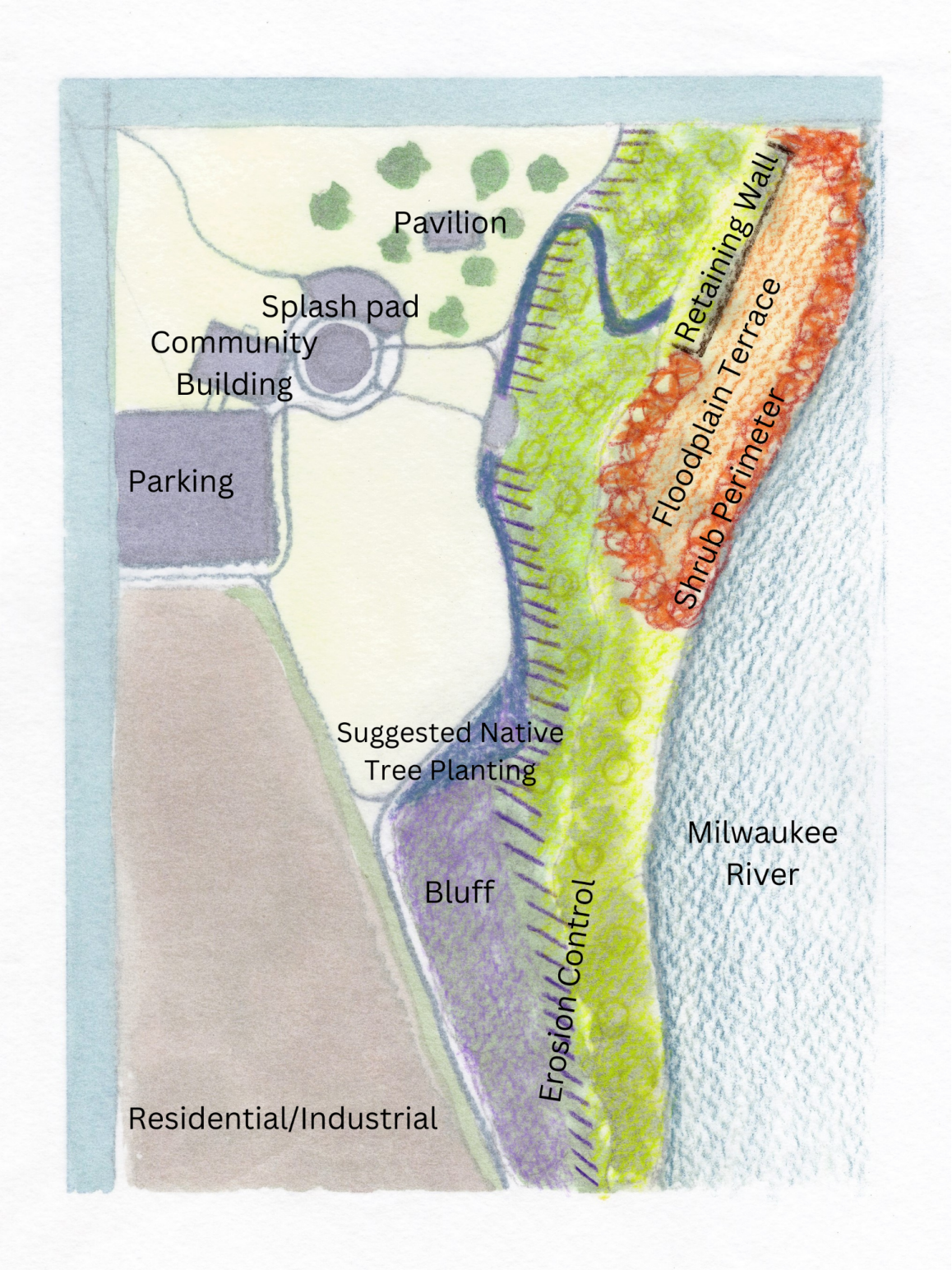
Gage height, ft ⓘ



Upstream from Gordon Park, height 2017 - 2023(USGS)

The Urban Ecology Center across the river has partially mitigated Reed Canary Grass by tarping and planting native species, and I suggest a similar approach to the floodplain. Sections of the floodplain could be suppressed for two years and planted with a cover crop of annual oats mixed with natives such as bluejoint grass, prairie

cordgrass, smooth blue aster, saw-tooth sunflower and blue vervain to increase diversity of habitat. I would also plant swamp milkweed and common milkweed into the floodplain during the second planting phase.



This grassy area creates important habitat for the Butler's garter snake, a Species of Local Conservation Interest (SLCI) and a major focus in the rehabilitation of the river. I would consult with a herpetologist so as not to disrupt the life cycle of the snake. The goal is to replace Reed Canary Grass with a more diverse set of resilient natives that can still provide this habitat. There are many foot paths that travel along the riparian edge of the river and provide the majority of human contact with the water. I propose seeding Path Rush into the existing trails in an attempt to create more erosion resistance.

I would include the community in an engagement session to discuss with the neighborhood the proposed activities along the river. I hope to involve the public so they can get excited about developing this area, and identify potential activities in the floodplain. With the help of volunteers through River Revitalization Foundation or another organization, we could live stake riparian species, such as willow and dogwood along the river's edge. Other plantings could take place with the help of other local groups. We could potentially plant dogbane, which is already present in the area.

Further up the bluff of Gordon Park I would add native trees to increase diversity to achieve the Milwaukee Greenways goal of habitat continuity. This could be done by installing a series of native shrubs and trees in key traffic areas, connecting wildlife needs and human considerations. I would like to establish a native tree population along the top of the bluff, to establish a presence of food to increase habitat desirability. I suggest Hazelnut, Serviceberry, and Wild Plum. This would help the Greenway move towards its goal for target species by creating increased food availability for birds and small mammals.

I would further the great work of the River Revitalization Foundation by continuing the management of garlic mustard, dames rocket, and buckthorn. The removal of buckthorn and honeysuckle on the top of the bluff could also provide raw brush material to build a series of berms along the bluff to improve erosion control. This creates more opportunity for habitat as well as improving water quality. The berms will

create soil and add to bluff stability over time. There are a few standing snags and a large number of fallen logs in this area that serve as habitat and as larger trees fall, I would like to see snags left standing to build towards our desired species list. Fallen trees can also sculpt the topography over time and create opportunities for erosion control.

Plan Timeline:

Floodplain Terrace management:

Year 1-Mow early spring before seed is viable, tarp/smother RCG in sections

Year 3- Remove tarp and seed cover crop and native species into smothered areas. Tarp remaining areas. Live stake willow, dogwood species into floodplain.

Year 5-Remove tarp and seed second series of tarped areas. Continue monitoring and suggest further actions.

Bluff Management:

Year 1-Remove Buckthorn with cut and wick method to reduce regeneration.

Remove other invasive shrubs and trees.

Use these to create berms on the edge of the bluff and habitat for bugs and small mammals.

Year 2-Plant native species with a focus on Bur oak to maximize habitat. Would also introduce Columbine. Wild Geranium and Wild Ginger are already present.

Year 3- Plant native Hazelnut, Serviceberry, and Wild plum into the existing edge of the bluff and in an unforested area next to the council ring to extend the forest edge and create a “safe haven” space and draw people to the council ring.

You don't have to use gold

to put yourself back together

Glue is just fine.

-Rielly Heintz

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