

Friday, June 12, 2015

Dear Supervisor:

The Friends of Grant Park are acutely aware of the way that shrinking budgets have damaged the ability of the county to adequately maintain the Milwaukee County Parks over the last two decades. Our group has often been called upon to finance the kind of things within Grant Park that in years past would have been covered by park funds. These include installing new park benches, security cameras for highly vandalized areas of the park (soon to be replaced after the first set were destroyed), replacing the carpeting in the club house at the golf course, and other items. Two years ago our group secured a \$5,000 grant, and matched it with our own funds, in order to restore a hillside in the Seven Bridges ravine that was badly eroded. Beyond this our group does regular invasive species eradication and cleanup in the park, which used to be done by county employees.

These budgetary issues alone would make it unconscionable to pass the resolution put forth by Supervisor Weishan, which calls for Milwaukee County to contribute what would amount to tens of thousands of dollars to the project costs, including the construction of the new access road and parking lot. To put it simply, it is not in the interests of the Milwaukee County taxpayers to subsidize, in such a large way, a small, private group which apparently has the financial wherewithal to locate a piece of property outside the park system on which to construct their facility.

The gun club's resolution comes on the heels of a December 2014 Department of Natural Resources "Responsible Party" letter which ordered the county and the Club to clean up and reclaim the Club's current site in Warnimont Park, finding that it was lead contaminated and covered with other environmental pollutants, including a hillside full of shattered toxic clay targets and plastic shotgun wads which had accumulated over decades of use and which were regularly washing onto the beach and into Lake Michigan. The ultimate cost to the taxpayers of this cleanup has not yet been determined. Given the Club's misuse of the present site, it is astounding to FOGP that the Club is not only asking to move to a new site within the park, but also for public funds.

The Club's history at the current site also bodes poorly for the prospect they would run their operation at the new site in a more responsible way. The lease they signed with the county requires them to keep the premises in a clean and sanitary condition. The DNR Responsible Party letter demonstrates they utterly failed to do so. Indeed, in recent years 25,000 clay targets, 25,000 plastic wads, and close to a ton of lead per year were deposited directly into the lake or onto the hillside and eventually winding up there as well. One DNR inspector recently viewing the hillside below the Club's site where its refuse accumulates referred to it as a "garbage dump."

After its lease was briefly terminated in November of 2014, the Club engaged in a public campaign of misinformation in hopes of remaining at the current site. Their initial press release, read on talk radio by Jeff Wagner, asserted that any claim by the Friends of Grant Park that gun club refuse was winding up on Grant Park beaches was "patently false" and "ridiculous." These kinds of claims were repeated. Yet the Club must have known these statements were false when they were made. This was established by the "farewell letter" issued by the Club's president in November of 2014 where he refers to beach cleanups by

the Club conducted the previous summer and earlier that picked up 200 pounds of their plastic wads along the beaches south of the Club. This translates into more than 37,000 plastic wads and confirmed what FOGP had been saying about the sheer quantities of Club garbage that was washing up on the beaches.

During this same public campaign by the Club to rescue its lease, it claimed that it had a fence located at the foot of the hillside at beach level that caught the refuse as it eroded off the hillside. That the Club must have known that this fence was dysfunctional in 2013 and had completely disappeared by 2014 is likewise clear. Pictures taken in November of 2013 and 2014 establish this and can be viewed at www.fogp.org . Yet the public was led to believe that the Club was controlling the flow of garbage off the hillside and into the lake.

To date the Club appears to demonstrate no comprehension of either the environmental damage caused at the current site, or the risk to which they put the Milwaukee County taxpayer. In December of 2014 the DNR conducted a meeting with the Club, Parks, FOGP, and other interested parties. Given the contamination of the site, and the ordered cleanup, the DNR "strongly encouraged" the Club to cease operations and not to reopen in February of 2015 until the extent of the damage could be determined and cleanup could be conducted. This was surely a reasonable suggestion. Did it make any sense to cover the hillside with another 25,000 shattered toxic clay targets and 25,000 more plastic wads, thus driving up reclamation costs which the taxpayers could ultimately be on the hook for? The Club's reaction was to open as scheduled.

Finally, on February 4, 2015 the DNR issued a letter directing that if the gun club was going to continue operation it was to utilize "best practices" to keep the refuse out of the lake. "Best practices" referred to a Manual of Practices endorsed by the NRA and amateur trap shooting associations, as well as the DNR and EPA, and utilized by other gun clubs which insure that a club's refuse does not leave the site. Friends of Grant Park itself had brought this manual to the attention of the Parks Department in November of 2013, which then forwarded it on to the Club. Following the February 4, 2015 DNR letter, FOGP forwarded a letter to the Club's attorney as well as the DNR asking specifically which best practices would be instituted at the site. FOGP received replies from neither party. The lack of response is most likely explained by the fact that to date none of these best practices, save one, have been implemented. In response to an order issued by the DNR, the Club has said they have changed from lead to steel shot. However, nothing has been done to prevent the toxic clay targets or the plastic wads from leaving the site. Not even a replacement fence has been installed at the base of the hillside.

Given this history of disregard for the park environment itself, as well as the economic interests of the Milwaukee County taxpayers, it would be inappropriate for this committee to endorse construction of yet a new site in Warnimont Park.

FRIENDS OF GRANT PARK
By Richard L. Kaiser