

## **Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory (Domes) Task Force Interim Report and Request for Action**

**“[T]here are viable approaches that can help to provide for a sustainable and economically viable Domes facility in Mitchell Park in the future. These approaches will require initial and ongoing investment by the public and private sectors. The results of implementing a sound strategy for revitalization of the Mitchell Park Domes will bring substantial economic and community benefits to Milwaukee County while preserving the iconic historically significant structures.” Phase I Domes Future Path and Feasibility Study.**

**The Task Force has narrowed eight options for the path forward to two that it believes should be examined by the Domes Task Force in more detail before making a final recommendation to the County Board and County Administration.**

**The Task Force respectfully requests County Board approval for transfer of \$X from account WP55301, Mitchell Park Conservatory Planning, to the Long-Term Planning subaccount within Sub-Project WP49003, Mitchell Park Domes Long Term Planning, and authority to access the funds transferred to engage consultants to do more detailed design, cost estimating, operating and governance planning respecting the two options the Task Force has selected. County Board approval for the transfer and for access is required. The funds in account WP55301 are currently \$320,000, and are adequate. and No additional funds are requested.**

**A summary of Consultants<sup>1</sup> conclusions is attached as App. A and their 90+ page Phase I report is attached as App. B.**

**Move to Appendix A** [In their report Consultants summarize the challenges and potential of the Domes: The Domes are accessible and highly visible. They are local icons and important nationally for their unique and compelling architecture and the grand spaces inside. However, their lack of supportive spaces including classrooms, offices, appropriately sized and outfitted retail and food service space and other support and public spaces limits their effectiveness as public attractions. The deteriorating physical conditions have not been comprehensively addressed but only within the limited resources available. There is also a lack of associated gardens and additional public draws to enhance the visitor experience and the duration of a visit. These factors have limited attendance. Also limiting attendance and earned revenue potential is the barebones staff and marketing budgets. Friends of the Domes have contributed to the ongoing operations of the Domes and have fundraised for improvements to the facilities. However, the government owned and operated structure of the Domes limits the capacity for

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<sup>1</sup> The Consultant team for the first two phases was led by HGA, an architectural and engineering firm with Milwaukee offices, and included in Phase I, ConsultEcon, a nationally prominent economic research and management consulting firm that serves the museum, attractions and tourism industry domestically and internationally. For the community outreach phase (Phase II) the team also included a local firm, Quorum Architects.

support of the Friends. The governance structure of the Domes has limited the ability and capacity to correct the deferred maintenance and to proactively augment the public offerings and the organization and operations of the Domes to allow them to achieve their potential.

While the Domes are not operating up to their potential as discussed above, the Domes have remained a popular attraction because of their unique design, beautiful arid and tropical biomes and changing exhibits. They remain among the highly attended attractions in Milwaukee and attract strong numbers of visitors from the local area as well as out-of-town tourists. As such, The Milwaukee Domes are a unique public asset in the Milwaukee area and indeed in the larger context of the State of Wisconsin and in Illinois and other areas that contribute substantially to Milwaukee tourism. There is considerable potential for attendance to the Domes to increase substantially depending on the mix of physical improvements, operational improvements and governance changes. Without such improvements, attendance is likely to stagnate.]

**Both options envision investing proactively in the Domes to create a much more valuable and impactful asset for the residents of the County, visitors to the County, and for its economic development.**

**Both Options include repairing the building envelope of all three of the Domes and addressing ADA and Code issues. Both save the historic Domes structures and would improve plant conditions.**

**Phasing is inherent in both options. A phased approach takes more time, but a given phase of investment or change will likely be more doable and feasible than a single large redevelopment of the Domes complex.**

**Option One: Targeted Investments. New targeted investments in facilities and operations to achieve higher levels of attendance, earned revenues and community benefits. Supports increase in attendance from current 200,000+ to target of 250,000. Increases earned revenues and opportunities for gifts and grants. Improves ratio of expenses to costs. Has potential for increased private sector involvement and creates opportunities for new partnerships. Moderately enhances visitor experience and dwell time growth. Moderately increases as a tourism draw, an economic benefit. Increases education and conservation benefits. This option requires both facilities and operating enhancements described in App. C**

**Move to App. C. [Targeted Investments facilities enhancements: additions and new construction to increase the functionality of the Domes. Classrooms, offices, meeting space, storage and ADA upgrades. improving/expanding the guest entrance, ticketing sequence and group arrival areas, and retail space. Provide food service with a small seating area. Improve the connections to the greenhouses and Annex. Enhance Annex for rentals including a catering kitchen and air conditioning. Upgrade the HVAC systems for the Domes and Domes complex.**

**Targeted Investments Operating enhancements:** Significant investment in operating enhancements would be required including *increasing staff and budgets* to improve operations, to *enhance marketing and outreach*, to *expand operating hours*, and to develop and implement *new and*

expanded programs and educational offerings (Increase STEM and STEAM education offerings to schools, and add new conservation, botanical and gardening educational programs for the general public. Partnerships with other organizations and entities would be developed and an increase in the role and responsibilities for fundraising and outreach of the private non-profit that relates to the Conservancy (Friends of the Domes) is envisioned. Parking capacity would increase, and site wayfinding improve. Connections to the rest of Mitchell Park and to the Menomonee Valley and the Hank Aaron trail would also be improved.]

**Option Two: Destination attraction.<sup>2</sup>** In addition to targeted investments invest in facilities and operations to make the Domes a regional or national leading horticultural conservatory and destination attraction. The Domes would become a destination education, conservation and recreational attraction focused on ecological habitats and horticultural themes. This option presents a major opportunity to enhance collections. It requires partners and outside investment. It likely needs an operating partnership with a not-for-profit organization. It will be flexible and designed to meet community and tourism needs. Attendance increases from 200,000+ to target 400,000. Provides a destination experience with much longer attendee time on site. Will extend use as a 12-month attraction/venue. Tickets, auxiliary revenue, contributions and grants substantially increase. Higher earned and contributed revenues support increased operations costs. It is likely that the County contribution can be capped at an agreed amount. Major benefits for tourism and major increase in economic benefits and job creation. Transformative education, conservation, social and community benefits. Transforms Domes to a major Milwaukee asset. The Destination Attraction Option facilities and Operating enhancements are described in App. D.

**Move to App. D. [Destination attraction facilities enhancements:** Show Dome becomes a new immersive Ecological Habitat Zone that might include a canopy walk, aquariums and live animals. A Changing Exhibit area would be created and a new facility for themed flower shows and other public events. Butterflies and other animals of the desert and tropical forest would be added to the other two domes. A children's garden would be added in a ticketed zone. Outdoor gardens-meditation, therapeutic, ethnic, rose, herb, heritage, etc. would be added to the ticketed zone or open to the public. Community gardens will be added, and a destination restaurant.

**Destination attraction operating enhancements:** Enhancements to staffing, operations, programs, education and partnerships would be made. "Summer in the Park" activities and programs would be added. Concerts and events increase. Develop research and conservation partnerships with for-profit companies and not-for-profit organizations and education partnerships with

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the total public feedback received, over 70% of the 2,300+ participants in the Domes poll are interested in having Milwaukee County lead a process toward restoring, redeveloping and improving the Mitchell Park Horticultural Conservatory into a destination attraction for Milwaukee County for generations to come.

universities and colleges. Attract funding partners and grants and gifts for ongoing activities.  
Attract private vendors for select activities.]

**Public support for both options:** The decisions of the Task Force on what options to pursue took into consideration the input received from the public. Input came from a public meeting, five meetings with selected focus groups and an online survey. Over 2,300 responses were received on the website. Many respondents submitted comments in addition to indicating the option they preferred. The two options the Task Force has decided to pursue further received the highest number of votes. 32% of respondents (784 votes) preferred the EcoDome destination attraction. The next largest option preferred was targeted investments, 21% (498 votes).

**Targeted Investments as a phase of becoming a destination attraction:** Public survey results suggest that starting with the Targeted Investments option could also phase into improving the Domes into a destination venue, Option 2, as funding becomes more certain.

**Governance changes likely, but not now:** For both options, capital funding for improvements beyond deferred maintenance will likely require a public-private partnership with one or more partners who share the vision the County adopts for the path forward. The partnership will be necessary to raise needed capital and to implement the adopted plan. The format and timing of governance changes will depend on the vision for the future of the Domes; the commitment Milwaukee County can make to achieve that future; and the partners and community that join in achieving the vision for the Domes. For option 1, targeted investments, consultants recommend considering changing the Domes on the County organization chart for direct reporting to leadership. The Domes would have its own budget and report to the County Executive directly and to the Parks, Energy and Environment Committee of the Board. The destination option, Option 2, would merit consideration of an operating partnership with responsibilities split between the County and a not-for-profit organization, or adoption of a County ownership/ not-for-profit operating organization governance model. Until the path forward and the likely partners are known the Task Force is not prepared to recommend governance changes for adoption.

**Both the Public and the Task Force reject doing nothing, demolishing the Domes, and only addressing deferred maintenance to the Domes structures, but not making other changes in facilities and operations.<sup>3</sup> The Task Force also rejects further pursuit of replacing one of the three Domes and focusing on adventure attractions to make the Conservatory a regional or national destination attraction.<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> The do nothing and demolish the Domes options each were preferred by only 1% of the 2300+ respondents to the Domes public survey.

<sup>4</sup> **Other options considered by consultants:** The Consultants considered, and their report analyzes several other options that the Task Force has decided not to pursue further. One is to do nothing, but that would eventually lead to the Domes demolition. A second is to demolish the Domes and prepare

**Costs: Projections of capital and operating costs for the two options are preliminary, order-of-magnitude estimates that need to be refined in the next phase to the Task Force’s work.** Consultants estimate an allowance of approximately \$25 million to address deferred maintenance issues with the Domes structures. Engineering reports indicate that the Domes are structurally sound and can be restored. With funds authorized in the 2018 budget, County Administration has awarded a contract to test the Domes concrete and steel support structure to better inform repair and maintenance needs and options. No action has yet been taken on a second study of repair and restoration options for the glass and its support structure to halt moisture infiltration. Results will help in the refinement of cost estimates. The consultants also project an allowance of an additional \$20 million for adding the targeted investments, for a total of \$45 million. To fully achieve the Destination Attraction option an additional approximately \$40 million might be required, for a total of \$85 million. Detailed planning in Phase III will produce more accurate and meaningful cost projections.

**Coordination with other studies: The Task Force will coordinate its work with the Hemp Study, File Number 18-690 and the Milwaukee Public Museum Site study from the 2019 Adopted Budget (Amendment 1A003).** The Task Force will meet with the MPM Site Study group at their final two meetings. The Task Force will endeavor, with the help of consultants, to identify elements of its proposals for a path forward that may be affected by the results of the efforts of both studies. The Task Force will include partnership with the Milwaukee Public Museum among the potential partners to be evaluated with the assistance of consultants in the next phase of its work.

**The Task Force’s next Phase:** The future path and feasibility study being conducted by the Task Force has been undertaken with the assistance of consultants that were engaged for the first two stages of a

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the location for other park uses. This option is estimated to require \$12 million. It would put the botanical collection valued at over \$3 million in jeopardy and require transfer to another facility or to build a new facility and would require investment in the Greenhouses and Annex for a new use. This option would result in substantial negative impacts to education conservation and the tourism economy and in loss of nationally important structures and a part of Milwaukee’s identity. Phase I Report, p. II-20. A third option was to address the deferred maintenance to the Domes, but not make other changes in facilities or operations. Consultants concluded current staffing levels may be unable to sustain current operations and a likely continued slow decline in earned revenues because functional shortcomings are not addressed and lack of market appeal. Tourism would be likely to decline, a negative economic impact. The potential for partner and outside investment would be minimal and there would be minimal or no increase in earned revenue. See Phase II Report Figure II-3a, b and c. Three other options were variations on ways for the domes to be a destination attraction. An Adventure Dome destination attraction option was analyzed by consultants, but the Task Force rejected further development of that option. Consultants also analyzed options where two of the Domes would be restored but one, the Show Dome, would be replaced by a new structure. The Task Force has rejected further consideration of the one new Dome variations of both the EcoDome and the Adventure Dome destination attraction proposals.

three-phase study. The rfp for the study described the third phase as follows: Phase III: Development of schematic programming and space needs costs for Task Force selected alternates. 1. For up to three (3) selected alternatives, based on the results of phases I and II, work with County staff and prepare schematic programming diagrams and space needs analysis. 2. Development of cost estimates for Capital Improvements including structure, support infrastructure, O&M costs and funding alternatives, will be expected in order to present fully the alternatives to the Task Force so they are able to make a thorough and clear recommendation to the County Board. 3. A minimum of three (3) Task Force meetings and one Parks Committee meeting will be required for updates 4. The diagrams and estimates will be presented to the task force along with a digital report and a multimedia presentation.

The result of Phases I and II have produced two alternatives, one fewer than the three that might have needed phase III analysis. The two alternatives are closely related. The destination option includes accomplishing the targeted investments option. Based on the results of Phases I and II, however, additional assistance from consultants will be needed to better define a path forward that is feasible. These additional needs may require a team of consultants with a broader range of capabilities than originally anticipated. The Task Force seeks approval from the County Board for engaging consultants to meet these additional needs. Additional assistance not specified previously includes:

**Additional consulting needs: In addition to the tasks previously described for Phase III the rfp should provide assistance with partnerships, funding sources and fundraising feasibility, facilities, business plans and pro forma projections, Domes restoration alternatives, and year round and outdoor activity and program areas. See App. E.**

#### **Move to App. E**

- A. **[Partnerships:** Assist the Task Force and County with the identification of and preliminary exploration of partnership opportunities, including, but not limited to, partnership with Boerner Botanical Garden, the Milwaukee County Public Museum, Wehr Nature Center, the Urban Ecology Center, academic institutions, including but not limited to UWM, Marquette University, MATC, and medical institutions, including the Medical College of Wisconsin, the Veterans Administration Medical Center, and Childrens' Hospital.
- B. **Funding sources and fundraising feasibility:** Identify and evaluate funding sources and their feasibility. In conjunction with the Task Force develop one or more case statements and conduct a fundraising feasibility study based on them. Develop an estimate of the amount of private and corporate donations, gifts and grants that can be achieved for each alternative. Identify sources of funding and evaluate eligibility for them, including government and private grants and loans, including historic preservation grants, loans and tax credits, and naming rights. Estimate projected reasonable totals for each source. In consultation with the County Comptroller and other sources determine the eligibility for bonding for rehabilitation and improvements.
- C. **Facilities:** Determine parking needs, propose parking improvements and estimate their initial cost, maintenance costs and expected life. Identify a location or locations for a **fee entry outside garden area**. In conjunction with the Task Force determine the space needs for

implementation of the alternatives, including increased classroom and meeting space. Identify opportunities for areas of the complex to be dedicated to specified events or uses while being able to use other facilities. Determine in consultation with the Task Force and appropriate experienced marketing and operations consultants the space needed for an expanded sales area for merchandise and for food service, including facilities to which access may be had by the public, both those who pay admission and others. Determine whether space in the Mitchell Park Pavilion can be used for Domes, staff offices, program, meeting or other uses. Determine whether improvements to the Domes can also accommodate means of access for inspection and/ or maintenance and their feasibility, costs and savings. With the assistance of horticultural experts determine whether the Domes can be modified to improve their impact on the collection, including, but not limited to, additional controls and systems for regulating temperature, humidity, reducing shadows and improving access to light.

- D. **Development of pro forma profit and loss projections:** Provide a pro forma business plan for each alternative. Determine the synergies from improvements and changes and estimate the impact they will have on overall revenue and expenses. Include estimates of operating and capital costs. Include estimated repair and maintenance schedules and costs. Develop time lines for changes to operations, for accomplishing improvements, modifications and additions, and for having funds available for them. Identify staffing needs, and space needed for staff offices, and provide a time line for staffing. Provide estimates of the impact of improvements, including revenue generating activities, on visit time.
- E. **Domes restoration:** After reviewing previous engineering studies and the results of ongoing examinations of concrete conditions and glazing redesign, evaluate and estimate costs for repair and restoration of the Domes structures. Advise the Task Force and County respecting the methodology, costs and benefits of rehabilitation alternatives.
- F. **Year-round out-door activity and program areas.** Specify outside program and activity areas, such as for sledding, skating, a water pad or other active water play option, etc., and areas for community gardens, therapy and other thematic gardens, instructional gardens, etc., and for temporary and permanent horticultural art installations. ]