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TO: Jessie Baker, City Manager
FROM: Ashley Parker, City Project Manager *AP*
Cc: Andrew Bolduc, Deputy City Manager
SUBJECT: Current Status of Open Space Projects and Funding
DATE: January 3, 2022

At the end of FY21, the Open Space Project Fund expenditure balance was approximately \$786,943.58 with approximately \$67,064.21 spent on improvements, land stewardship, and projects; and \$124,407.62 spent on the loan repayment.

FY21 saw an increase in interest earned on the debt proceeds from the loan. This was interest that had collected since the beginning of the loan but was only tabulated in FY21. The amount in FY21 was about \$59,394.34, almost zeroing out the total costs expended throughout the year. The total expenses were also down due to slow downs and delays related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Projects continue to be delayed, with implementation now expected in FY22 for many.

The Open Space Task Force had created a list of Open Space Priorities that were both project specific and on-going for the following City Natural Areas: Red Rocks Park, Wheeler Nature Park, and the Hubbard Recreation & Natural Area. Attached is that original document with an added update column indicating current project status.

Staff would also like to note the removal of some projects originally listed on the Open Space Priorities spreadsheet that is attached. Here is a brief overview of the projects that were removed, justification for removal, and cost savings for each.

Table of Projects Removed from Updated Open Space Priority Spreadsheet (September 2021)

Project Removed	Justification	Cost Savings
Wheeler: Accessible path to picnic table (from gravel lot off Swift to Wheeler House)	Dog Park planning and approval has made this project unfeasible.	\$22K - \$43K
Wheeler & Red Rocks: WVPD Projects	Staff does not foresee utilizing the WVPD crew for specific projects within either park in the near future. Consultants are being used to more efficiently complete projects. Potential future projects will be related to	\$5K - \$10K



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	annual maintenance and will not be capital expenses.	
Wheeler: Utilize BMPs to manage grassland/shrubland habitat	DPW staff already do this work as part of their budget, and additional projects are being funded via third party grants. This is not a capital project.	\$8K - \$12K

Also included in this memo, is a snap shot of which projects or related tasks have been completed to-date, as well as those projects that are underway for possible FY22 completion.

The projects/tasks completed to date are:

Red Rocks Park:

- Professional invasive plant management services throughout the 2021 growing season, including training of new City volunteers in connection with the Weed Warrior Program.
- Consultants have completed a wetland delineation required by VT Agency of Natural Resources as part of their permitting review.
- Working with consultants to continue permitting work with the goal of permitting all projects being proposed at Red Rocks at the end of FY22/beginning of FY23. Projects wrapped into this permitting include: trail improvements, trail reroutes, beach access trail renovation, stormwater facilities, culvert protection at the beach, shoreline stability, and parking layout improvements.
- Staff planned a full 2021 season of Community Hikes that were spread throughout the three natural area parks. Two are planned at Red Rocks in the fall of 2021. There were two virtual events earlier in the year as the state continued to incorporate COVID guidance into planning for events.
- The Management Plan Task Force has been on hold since late 2020. The management plan revisions have been in staff's hands, but staff has not had the capacity to complete the required plan revision. Staff hopes to take this on in the winter of 2021, with the goal of proposing revisions to the full Task Force in spring 2022.
- A UVM NR206 class completed a project focused on how the City could implement a volunteer driven volunteer stewardship project to assist in the monitoring, maintenance, and stewardship of Red Rocks. The idea would be to start a program at Red Rocks and then expand to other parks. The students also provided staff with a selection of courses that would be useful in training volunteers in natural resource management, but could also be used to implement programming for summer camps. Staff hope to take a closer look at how to best initiate this program over the next year as we come out of COVID and hire additional Recreation Programmers.

Wheeler Nature Park:



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- Professional invasive plant management services throughout the 2021 growing season, including training of new City volunteers in connection with the Weed Warrior Program.
- Fabrication and installation of a new wayfinding sign package was completed in the summer of 2021. This included 25 new signs ranging from park id signs, kiosks, interpretive panels, and trail directionals. This is the first official wayfinding package installed at Wheeler.
- Completed maintenance on all remaining trail segments – the Wheeler Trail, the Sugarbush Trail, and the Creek Trail. New puncheon was installed along the Wheeler Trail and Sugarbush Trail, and stone stairs and puncheon were installed along the Creek trail. This work finalizes the capital nature of this project. Future effort will involve annual maintenance of all trails at Wheeler and should be prioritized somewhere in the annual budget.
- Staff planned a full 2021 season of Community Hikes that were spread throughout the three natural area parks. Three events took place at Wheeler in 2021. There were two virtual events earlier in the year as the state continued to incorporate COVID guidance into planning for events.
- Continued conversations with Audubon Vermont and US Fish & Wildlife to consider bird habitat management projects at Wheeler. Fish & Wildlife has grant money that is provided to Audubon to work on projects. Wheeler is a great site for invasive plant management that will support unique and rare bird species, and they would like to conduct this kind of work there. This work will build off the work already being done by City staff and through our Weed Warrior program via Mike Bald. Staff is working on finalizing an agreement with Audubon that would allow this work to take place over winter (during FY22).

Hubbard Recreation & Natural Area:

- Professional invasive plant management services throughout the 2021 growing season, including training of new City volunteers in connection with the Weed Warrior Program.
- Staff selected a design firm to begin work on the viewing area, on-site parking, pedestrian connectivity, and stormwater elements associated with the design.
- The design/engineer consultant continued design efforts associated with the proposed ~1,500 foot long shared use path connection.
- The project team is working on bringing all proposed elements (all of the elements mention above, including trail formalization structures) onto one site plan to be submitted for permit review at the state and local levels. This will kick off after the conclusion of a public forum on September 23, 2021.
- Pending permitting and the results of the public forum in September, staff is hopeful that construction can begin next summer (2022).
- Staff approved a request from a Yale research team to use HRNA as part of their climate research study. They are looking at insects and impacts of climate change on the overall food web. The researchers will be utilizing the site, and the same location, for the next



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three-four years. The City agreed not to mow that area throughout the duration of their study, and the study will not be impacted by any of the proposed project elements.

- Staff planned a full 2021 season of Community Hikes that were spread throughout the three natural area parks. One event took place at HRNA in 2021, with a second scheduled to take place in September 2021. These were the first Community Hike series events at HRNA. There were also two virtual events earlier in the year as the state continued to incorporate COVID guidance into planning for events.

Projects Underway for FY22 Completion:

Red Rocks Park:

- Completed permitting at the state and local level for proposed trail and stormwater projects within the park.
- Implement two priority trail improvement projects, including the formalization of a side trail, closure of CWD metal staircase and other unnecessary trails, and installation of relevant stormwater infrastructure. Plan implementation of other trail and park projects.
- Completion of another season of invasive plant removal work, including work by professional consultant and the City's Weed Warrior program.
- Draft Update to the existing Red Rocks Park Management Plan prepared by the Management Plan Task Force.
- Consideration of grant application(s) to supplement Open Space Funds for the trail improvement/stormwater work at the park.
- Continued Community Hike series at the park.

Wheeler Nature Park:

- Completed all trail maintenance projects identified in the Trail Assessment and Report.
- Fabricated and installed new wayfinding signs for the entire park.
- Completion of another season of invasive plant removal work, including work by professional consultant and the City's Weed Warrior program.
- Continued Community Hike series at the park (schedule at least 3 hikes).
- Initiated bird habitat management work (large-scale invasive plant removal) in partnership with Audubon Vermont and the US Fish & Wildlife Service.

Hubbard Recreation & Natural Area:

- Complete the permitting, design and engineering, and construction of the shared use path connection, viewing area, on-site parking, trail formalization, stormwater treatment, and pedestrian connections.
- Completion of another season of invasive plant removal work, including work by professional consultant and the City's Weed Warrior program.
- Continued Community Hike series at the park.
- Begin the design of wayfinding signage – identify the location of all signs and begin design of what information we need to display.