DATE: October 26, 2020

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Stormwater Facility Maintenance, Department of Environmental Protection

CC: Michael Wilpers, Natural History Committee, Friends of Sligo Creek
Stephen Davies

RE: Habitat improvements at Wheaton Branch Stormwater Ponds

Friends of Sligo Creek would like to recommend three ways to improve natural habitat at the Wheaton Branch stormwater ponds. Needless to say, we greatly value our long-term relationship with DEP and all of the progress made in recent years to improve stormwater management throughout the Sligo watershed and thus the habit for fish and macroinvertebrates, including the crayfish that our cherished night-herons depend upon.

This current proposal is directed toward enhancing the habitat value of the Wheaton Branch ponds. We are grateful that DEP already improved the habitat with reduced mowing of one of the embankments (berms, risers), the one between the ponds and Dennis Avenue. The avoidance of mowing during the growing season has resulted in dense establishment of grasses and wildflowers serving many birds and pollinators, including two nesting pairs of Red-winged Blackbirds in 2020.

REDUCED MOWING

We would like to return to the topic of reduced mowing in the northern half of the ponds, which we discussed with DEP staff back in about 2012, at the instigation of then-president Michael Wilpers. We understood at that time that the northern portions of each embankment do not function as a dams, by virtue of their upstream position (see Figure 1) and would be open to more flexible management practices than the downstream segments. We therefore propose once

a year, winter-only mowing along these banks (see Figure 2) to allow for the growth of grasses and wildflowers throughout the spring, summer, and fall, which would in turn provide nesting sites for birds and nectar sources for insect pollinators. Red-winged Blackbirds (a species in decline across the state) are more likely to nest along these ponds if more "structural complexity" is provided through plant life, according to a specialist in this species who used to live nearby the ponds.

University Blvd. Ponds Model

The mowing regime we propose is modelled after the one currently being followed along the base of the embankment along the southern (downstream) edge of DEP's stormwater ponds in Kemp Mill near University Blvd. This inspired new practice, carried out by Montgomery Parks, has produced healthy herbaceous growth since its implementation a couple of years ago (see Figure 3, below). At least one breeding pair of Red-winged Blackbirds nested in this new foliage in 2020.

We understand from Parks that reduced mowing along the banks of these ponds is allowable because their mowing qualifies as non-structural maintenance of the embankment, which includes landscaping, grass cutting, removal of trash and solid waste, and removal of trees and brush on the embankment of a facility. We hope that mowing along the upstream portions of the Wheaton Branch ponds also qualifies as non-structural maintenance and can therefore be limited to the winter months to allow for better habitat.

Pollinators at Wheaton Branch

This year, all the embankments at the Wheaton Branch ponds, except the one along Dennis Ave. were mowed to the water line in mid-summer (see Figure 4), which was terrible timing for butterflies and other insects. Before the mow, several skipper species (including Sachem, Fiery Skipper and Peck's Skipper) were common, and Monarch butterflies were frequently observed collecting nectar and laying eggs on the abundant milkweed (see Figures 5 and 6). The mid-summer mow obliterated the milkweed, other flowers, and the insect populations. In addition, the timing of the mow prevented other plants from growing and flowering, so it had a disastrous effect on late-summer nectar sources.

Birds at Wheaton Branch

The value of managing areas with reduced mowing is evident from the many birds that utilize the less-mown areas within the ponds complex. This year, the lush growth on the embankment along Dennis Avenue attracted nesting pairs of Red-winged Blackbirds and several rarely seen fall migrants, including Mourning Warbler, Nashville Warbler, and Tennessee Warblers. The infrequently mowed vegetation south of cell #3 served as a resting spot for additional scarce migrants, such as Connecticut Warbler, Black-billed Cuckoo, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and

Lincoln's Sparrow. The appeal of these areas to birds shows how the demand for them by wildlife could be more abundantly met if reduced mowing was applied to a larger part of ponds area.

NEST BOXES

We would like to explore whether it's possible to restore the bird-nesting boxes that used to be in place on tall poles within the ponds (for example, in the northeast quadrant of the pond complex). These boxes attracted breeding pairs of Tree Swallows, which no longer nest in the area and are rarely seen there. Consider also adding boxes along the banks for Eastern Bluebirds, which are likely to nest in this area.

CHURCH WOODLAND

Can DEP protect or acquire the woodland adjacent to the eastern side of the ponds? The property currently belongs to Sligo Baptist Church, which attempted a few years ago to lease or sell part of the woodland for cell phone tower (which was successfully opposed by neighbors). The church more recently put the entire property on the market for sale to a developer. Perhaps DEP could acquire the woodland piece of this property at a prorated cost. Alternately, the church might be approached to dedicate that portion as a conservation easement. This woodland provides a significant buffer to the ponds and constitutes important habitat on its own. As part of the evaluation of the cell tower proposal, survey was conducted of the plants of the woodland.

CONCLUSION

The Wheaton Branch stormwater ponds and surrounding landscapes already constitute a gem among the wild areas of the Sligo watershed. With these three steps, they would provide even richer habitat supportive of many more plants, birds, and pollinators. Please let us know if you are open to taking these steps, meeting to discuss the proposal, or if we can provide any additional information.

FIGURES

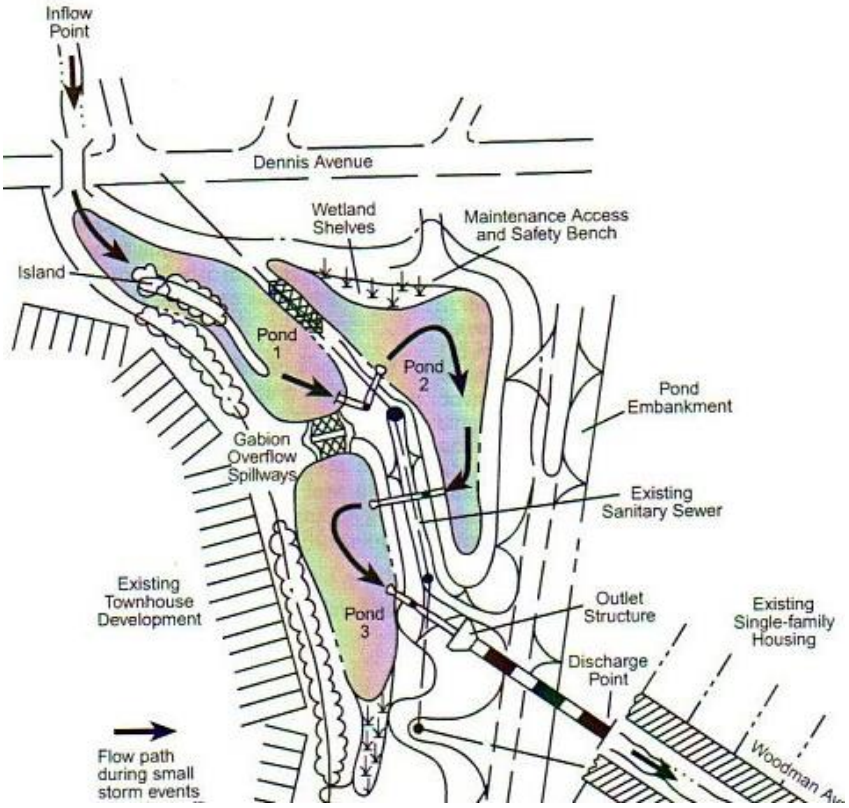

Fig. 1. Water flow in Wheaton Branch stormwater ponds.

Fig. 2: Proposed area for reduced mowing (winter only)

Fig. 3: Result of reduced mowing along the stormwater ponds in Kemp Mill near University Boulevard (Sept 12, 2020)

Fig. 4: Result of frequent mowing along the Wheaton Branch ponds (Sept. 20, 2020). This photo shows the northern, upstream half of pond #2.

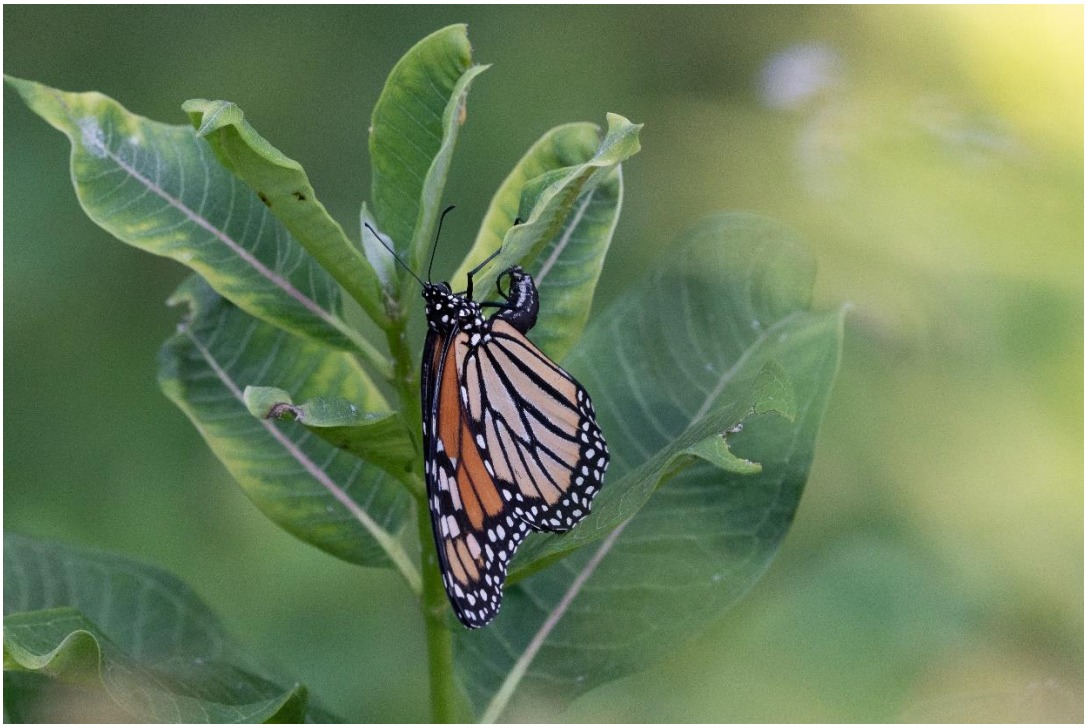

Figure 5. Monarch butterfly laying eggs on Common Milkweed at the Wheaton Branch stormwater ponds on July 18, 2020. After early August, the milkweed and Monarchs were gone.

Figure 6. Sachem skipper (butterfly) in vegetation around the Wheaton Branch stormwater ponds on July 13, 2020. Their abundant population crashed in early August after a mow.

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