

SAHARA PARK MASTER PLAN

Prepared For:

**City of Billings
Parks, Recreation and Public Land
390 North 23rd Street
Billings, MT 59101**

March 23, 2009



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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History

Sahara Park is a 9.26 acre property that was acquired through parkland dedications of the Sahara Sands Subdivision between 1975 and 1977. The Park is bounded on the west by Aronson Avenue and to the north by Caravan Avenue. Sahara Park has had no development, and there is no current approved master plan on record.

The need for a master plan was determined when the Better Billings Foundation, a 501 C3 non-profit organization, approached the Parks and Recreation Department in May of 2008 with the desire to build a family aquatic facility in the Heights. Several public and private properties were analyzed through a benefit matrix to determine the best overall location for an aquatic facility and Sahara Park was determined to be the best location of all the sites considered.

According to the City of Billings Master Plan Policy, parkland cannot be developed until a park master plan has been prepared and adopted by the Billings City Council. All proposed park development must be consistent with an approved master plan. This plan considers surrounding zoning, land uses, local and general parks and recreation needs and requests from interested users. This is to assure adequate public input into the development, sale or use of public parklands. A proposed modification to a park that significantly departs from the approved master plan requires a revision of the master plan in the same process to determine if the proposed change is acceptable and appropriate for that park.

Introduction

The master plan for Sahara Park is unique in that it also has an alternative B component. The original master plan viewed Sahara Park as a Special Use or Multiple Use Park designation as outlined in the Parks 20/20 Plan. These designations are geared toward meeting the park and recreational needs of the larger community. This type of park tends to be intensively developed often serving unique and often singular activities or uses that are enjoyed by the entire community. Upon request of the City Council an Alternative Plan B was also developed to see what Sahara Park could look like without a family aquatic facility. This plan reflects the Neighborhood Park concept described in the Parks 20/20 Plan.

Sahara Park Master Plan Process

Sahara Park was one of a number of potential sites that were evaluated through a benefit matrix to determine suitability for construction of an aquatic facility (see Appendix A). After evaluating a number of criteria including location, accessibility to the site, access to utilities, environmental factors and build-ability of the site, Sahara Park came out as the most favorable site to locate an aquatic facility. Parks and Recreation Staff facilitated the plan with the assistance of the Better Billings Foundation and evaluated the site for opportunities and constraints consistent with a Special Use or Multiple Use Park. ~~*At the same time the Library Department approached the Parks and Recreation Department to request that as part of the master plan, a portion of the site be identified for future consideration as a possible location for a Satellite Library. When funding becomes available the Library would like to have a place holder in the master plan to consider Sahara Park along with a number of other potential sites in the~~

~~Billings Heights for a Satellite Library.~~ The preliminary master plan was developed which contained the following elements:

- Family Aquatic Park.
- ~~*Satellite Library/Community Center site for future evaluation by the Library Department.~~
- On-site parking requirements.
- Structured Play areas including picnic shelters, tennis courts
- Large open active play areas that could be programmed for a wide variety of sports and activities.
- Access to the Heritage Trail along Aronson Avenue.
- Access to public transportation.
- Inter-park walking/exercise path.

On November 20, 2008, a public meeting was held at the Billings Community Center to present the preliminary master plan and to receive public comment. The following are the comments received:

Comments from the Public:

1. Do not want more traffic on Caravan. Eliminate the parking ingress/egress there.
2. Do not want a huge tall Library building which will block the view shed or be ugly.
3. Want the Library building to visually fit into the neighborhood.
4. Our buildings are ugly in Billings-need more trees and landscaping.
5. Do not want other amenities in the park. (No pool or library)
6. Want basketball courts in the park.
7. Want tennis courts in the park.
8. Want sand volleyball in the park.
9. Want a nature learning center in the park.
10. Keep as much of the park natural as possible.
11. Purchase the adjacent property and keep that as natural open space.
12. Concerned about drinking parties in the park.
13. Want the playground to be open to the public year round.
14. Make sure there is adequate parking.
15. Consider the view shed of the neighborhood when placing the park features.
16. Screen the pool area and other areas with plantings in the park.

From these comments, a buffer area between the property owners and the park was added to the plan (see Appendix B).

***Library site removed from Master Plan by City Council on March 23, 2009.**

Sahara Park Master Plan Alternative B Process

After presenting the preliminary Sahara Park Master Plan to the City Council on December 1, 2008, at a regularly scheduled work session, Council asked Staff to develop an Alternative B plan that would explore what the Sahara Park Master Plan could look like without the family aquatic facility.

Staff took the approach that without an aquatic facility, the park would function as a Neighborhood Park. As part of the analysis process in determining the elements to include in a neighborhood park model, public input from the neighborhood would be important. Therefore two public meetings were scheduled.

Public Meeting #1

The first meeting was held on January 15, 2009 at the Billings Community Center. In the meeting the attendees were divided into 3 groups and asked a series of questions. Their responses were recorded on flip charts. At the end of the meeting each group made a brief presentation of their responses. The questions and their responses are as follows:

Sahara Park Master Plan Alt. B
Comments to Questions at Public Meeting #1
January 15, 2009

Total Number Signed In: 22 (approximately 25 in attendance)

Park Usage

- For what purpose/activities would you use the park?
 - Walking
 - Gathering area
 - Sports
 - Active play on structures
 - Water activities
 - Picnics (open and shelter)
- How often?
 - Range from daily to never

Your Vision

- What elements are important?
 - Trails (multi-use)
 - Natural landscape
 - Wildlife area
 - Safety (pedestrian,
 - Parking
 - Ball field (boys and girls)

- General sports – practice
- Picnic tables
- Picnic shelter
- Restrooms
- Open area (sports, games)
- Water play area
- Trees
- Preserve rims
- Volleyball
- Library (smaller footprint)
- Are there any concerns you would have?
 - Environmental impacts
 - Wildlife
 - Traffic volume and high speeds on Aronson
 - Pedestrian safety
 - Bus stop (safe location)
 - Adequate parking
 - Preserving natural landscape, topography
 - Bring back girls softball in the area
 - Ball control (from leaving park)
 - Development and maintenance costs
 - Pool and library located on site
 - Overhead power lines, gas line
 - Impacts with crime (illicit activity)
- What would you not want to see in the park?
 - Pool facility
 - Library
 - Commercial
 - Concessions
 - Curbside parking

Character

- Are there any unique features you would like to see or preserve in the park?
 - Natural vegetation
 - Wildlife
 - Existing game trails
 - Preserve rims (rock outcrops?)
- What would make this park unique?
 - No response given

These comments along with other factors and constraints that need to be considered for public health, safety and welfare of the general public were analyzed to develop a preliminary Sahara Park Master Plan Alternative B (see Appendix C). The elements contained in the plan are as follows:

- ~~*Proposed Library/Community Center~~
 - ~~*This element was retained as a placeholder for future consideration by the Library Department.~~
 - ~~*Parking would be part of the Library consideration.~~
- Formal Structured Play Area
 - Picnic Shelter
 - Play Structure
 - Water Play area
 - Volleyball
 - Basketball Courts
 - Outdoor Reading/Gathering Area
- Active Programmable Space
 - Open area for sports and sport practices.
 - Large gatherings including reunions, company picnics, neighborhood Parties, school activities.
- Other Features
 - Low development and maintenance costs.
 - Trails (connections to the Heritage Trail system and exercise).
 - Safety for pedestrians and bus access.
 - Trees
 - Natural Landscape

Public Meeting #2

The second meeting was held on January 27, 2009, in conjunction with the Billings Heights Task Force monthly meeting at Castle Rock Middle School. Parks and Recreation Staff presented the Sahara Park Master Plan Alternative B. Attendees at the meeting were generally in favor of the plan. Questions of implementation and funding were asked and it was explained that the original Sahara Park Master Plan would go forward as the plan for the park. If the original plan does not get developed and there is interest in the neighborhood to develop Alternative Plan B then the property owners in the benefit district would have to approve (through a simple majority vote) the development of the park through creation of a Special Improvement District (SID) and Park Maintenance District (PMD). These assessments would fund the construction and ongoing maintenance of the park.

Master Plan Implementation

The Sahara Park Master Plan is unique because of its two part nature. It is recommended that the City Council and a public or private organization(s) enter into a Development Agreement ~~within one year's~~ by September 30, 2009, (as amended by City Council on March 23, 2009) to provide specific timelines, terms and conditions to fund, construct and maintain an aquatic facility at Sahara Park. If an agreement cannot be reached ~~within a year~~ by September 30, 2009, (as

amended by City Council on March 23, 2009), then the Alternative Plan B should become the governing master plan for Sahara Park.

***Library site removed from Master Plan by City Council on March 23, 2009.**

Appendix A

<i>Location options</i>	<i>Weight of Importance</i>	<i>Harvest</i>	<i>Castlerock</i>	<i>Sahaha</i>	<i>High Sierra</i>
Environment					
Soils	3	2	4	4	2
Wind	4	1	2	3	2
Dust	3	1	3	3	2
Adequate land					
	5	5	3	4	5
Expansion Potential					
	3	3	2	3	5
Road Circulation					
Vehicle accessible					
	5	2	3	4	1
Bike trail accessible					
	2	2	3	4	1
Road improvements					
	3	3	5	5	2
Traffic impact					
	3	2	3	3	2
Overall location					
	3	2	3	4	1
Restaurant/Shopping					
	3	2	3	4	2
Lodging					
	3	1	3	4	1
Visibility					
	4	2	3	4	1
Demographics/User groups					
	4	2	3	4	2
Infrastructure					
Utilities					
	3	3	4	4	1
Improvements					
	4	3	5	5	2
Other					
Fund raising opportunities					
	4	2	3	3	3
Masterplanned					
	2	5	1	4	2
Totals		146	192	234	130

NOTE: Weight value 1-5 with 5 being most important.

Weight considered both constructability and operational concerns

Appendix B

Appendix C