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STATEMENT ON BELLE ISLE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT PLAN

February 1, 2018

Detroit Audubon would like to thank the DNR for seeking input on Belle Isle Park's Strategic Management Plan. Our members and program participants enjoy Belle Isle both for its recreational opportunities and for its natural areas that provide crucial habitat for local and migratory birds. We fear that Belle Isle has been focused more on its managed and planned areas at the expense of natural and wild areas where forests and tall grasses thrive. We would like to see more "primitive" and "backcountry" zones on the park map's draft management zones. The original plan for Belle Isle had about two thirds of the island in a more natural state.

We would especially like to see focus on the area south and south east of Blue Heron Lagoon that was historically left as grassland where species such as Eastern Meadowlarks, Eastern Bluebirds, Horned Larks, Northern Shrikes, Killdeer and Savannah Sparrows nested. About three years ago the state park began to continuously mow this area very short (even during bird breeding season). This area is currently listed as "natural resource recreation" despite the fact that this management plan refers to "the prairie and grassland bird area" on page 40. We have spoken with many people at the DNR with requests to bring this space back to grassland and to stop mowing and were very pleased to see that the mowing was stopped this last summer (2017). Leaving this space as meadow has worked in the past as there are plenty of other areas on Belle Isle that are actively mown for human use. This section of the park best serves both human and animal communities by being mostly left alone to return to grassland. The path surrounding this area allows people to see how beautiful meadows are and to witness that many species that call this habitat home. Many birdwatchers and others interested in spending time in more natural areas will now enjoy this area more. Of course, it will also cut down on labor and time to by not keeping this large space mown short! We would love to partner with the state park to produce one or more wayside exhibits to explain the birds and ecology of native grasslands. We would also be interested in partnering to bring back the bluebird trail (bluebird nest boxes along the shrub interface near Blue Heron Lagoon with the grassland.

As mentioned, we were thrilled to see the area without mowing this summer, gratified that the grasses and wild flowers had grown back and were eagerly anticipating the Eastern Meadowlarks and other grassland birds coming back this spring. However, on a December field trip to the island, we found that this area has been used to dump spoils from the Lake Okonoka dredging. This was quite disheartening. This area needs to be kept as a natural grassland and

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not used as a dumping site. We urge the spoils be removed, and the area returned to meadow as soon as possible.

We are excited to see that this strategic management plan includes a natural Resource Stewardship Plan in Appendix H. We note that one of the natural features listed is the “prairie and other open upland habitats near Blue Heron lagoon” and that page 178 highlights the species that had been once (though we doubt now) present in this area. We can assure you that the Savannah Sparrows and Bobolinks that are mentioned in this plan will not be present in this area in the spring if the lake dredges are kept on site. We hope that this means the dredge spoils will be removed and that in the very near future, this area will be allowed to covert back to prairie or intentional meadow (only mowed in the off-season and not every year).

We are also concerned about the trailhead for the Iron-Belle trail being located in this native grassland area south and southeast of Blue Heron lagoon. If there is a concrete footprint that encroaches on this area, then that is not acceptable. That could also mean large numbers of people congregating there which could discourage bird nesting. It would be better to locate it across the road and have information available for trail users to let them know about this grassland and encourage them to view it in small numbers without creating major infrastructure at this location. This should be a “primitive area!”

We hope that an Environmental Impact Statement was prepared before the work of Lake Okonoka was approved. We would like to see copies of Environmental Impact Statements for projects affecting natural areas on Belle Isle in the future. We understand that this Friends of the Detroit River project is being done to reconnect the Lake Okonoka to Blue Heron Lagoon and to the river as well as create deep water fish habitat. There are more than deep water fish we should be concerned about, however. What about wading birds like the many species of herons that have used Lake Okonoka for years? Will they still have adequate habitat? What happened to the frogs and turtles hibernating in the muck? We are assuming they were killed; will there be habitat for them going forward? We should not be decreasing overall biodiversity to “improve the lake” for one category of species, deep water fish. We are also concerned with a statement at the evening public meeting on the strategic plan that this project will now mean that boats will be able to come into Blue Heron Lagoon and Lake Okonoka from the river. We believe this is a terrible idea. Blue Heron Lagoon is an important staging area for thousands of migrating waterfowl. They would be scared away if boat traffic from the river had free access to the lagoon. This could not only affect our ability to enjoy watching these birds but could affect their very survival.

We were very hopeful when the DNR took over management of the island that the state park division’s exemplary record of being good stewards of park flora, fauna and ecosystems in state parks throughout the state would bode well for Belle Isle. Unfortunately, in too many

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ways things have gotten worse for native species and ecosystems since this management began. We do commend the DNR on its invasive species control (which we'd like to see more of, such as controlling the *Phragmites* around the nature center).

Finally, we would like to state our continued opposition to hosting the Detroit Grand Prix on Belle Isle and are dismayed to note that it is prominently highlighted in Appendix A under Programming and Events. We were told Thursday night that the Grand Prix was being dealt with in a separate planning process, yet here it is in the strategic plan. We continue to encourage the DNR to not renew the contract with the Grand Prix. We are not opposed to this event occurring; instead we are against it happening on the largest park in Detroit. The Grand Prix should find a new home, not one within a public space enjoyed by thousands of Detroiters for its natural beauty. It mars the aesthetics and access to the park and to areas for viewing and enjoying wildlife for over three months during prime birding season. It is ugly and restricts too much access to the riverfront. We continue to push for an independent Environmental Impact Study of the Grand Prix at the very least before any new lease is considered. It should not be renewed, but if it must, there needs to be much more severe restrictions to protect the natural features, allow more access, drastically reduce set-up and take-down time, not driving nails into trees, etc. We also believe that the huge area of pavement at the western part of the island should be removed, and the grove of trees planted by SOSAD in memory of young victims of gun violence should be restored as best as can be done. There should be no other motorized races allowed on Belle Isle and no concerts or other high impact events in the natural part of the park, especially around Blue Heron Lagoon. We love concerts and festivals, but they belong on the other more manicured end of the park.

Thanks for your kind attention to these comments and concerns.

James N. Bull, Ph.D.,
President

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