



BOPC Position Statement on taking of historic parkland for expansion of Cultural Institutions

July 2020

History:

The Buffalo Olmsted Park System was established throughout the latter half of the 19th century, beginning in 1868. The partnership between the Olmsted Firm and the City of Buffalo resulted in the creation of more than 850 acres of beautifully designed parkland, developing the framework for the growth of the city around a system of publicly accessible greenspaces. Due to the significance of Frederick Law Olmsted's work throughout the United States, park systems have become more than simply natural landscapes for public enjoyment, they are cultural landscapes.

Olmsted, in partnership with Calvert Vaux and others designed and located a number of structures throughout the parks. The South Park Conservatory by Lord and Burnham (now the Buffalo and Erie County Botanical Gardens) is the only historic structure planned by Olmsted for construction and the only "original" such structure remaining in the parks today. All other original structures - apart from one building from the Parade (MLK Jr. Park) which was moved out of the park in the 1890s - were either demolished or never constructed.

At the end of 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the City of Buffalo began to see the development of another layer of cultural history placed upon Olmsted Park designs; the cultural institutions. This includes the construction of several schools, the formalization of the Buffalo Zoological Gardens at the edge of the meadow in Delaware Park, the construction of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and New York State Building (present The Buffalo History Museum) for the 1901 Pan American Exposition, the Museum of Science (1929) at the terminus of Humboldt Parkway in MLK Jr. Park, along with several casinos and shelter buildings throughout the park system. These new buildings consumed space and deprived citizens of Buffalo valuable park acreage.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a major shift in how our City leaders and government agencies regarded public parkland. Parks were often seen as vacant land that could be used for other purposes. The legacy of this era is found in expressways annihilating parkways and cutting through parks, in the construction of schools and recreation/community centers in the landscape, and in the unimpeded expansion of cultural and academic institutions. These intrusions continued to erode the historic

integrity of the Olmsted Park System with further expansions and parking lots. It was in response to these depredations that a group of concerned citizens joined together to raise awareness and to fight to protect the diminishing Olmsted legacy in Buffalo.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Board of Education of the City of Buffalo slated development plans to include a school adjacent to the Buffalo Museum of Science, consuming public parkland. The Friends of the Olmsted Parks (FOP), with other interested parties, banded together in 1978 to oppose the taking of public parkland and to preserve the Olmsted open space and five acre rose garden in the northwest corner of MLK Jr. Park. FOP battled all the way to the New York Court of Appeals, but in the end was unsuccessful in preserving the public parkland.

FOP was formally incorporated as a non-profit in 1982. Its mission was to preserve and to protect greenspace. It commissioned documentation to have the Buffalo Olmsted Park and Parkway System listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A nomination document was developed in 1979, and in March of 1982 the Buffalo Olmsted Park System was officially listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a Thematic Resource. Today, the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy (BOPC), FOP's successor, fulfills its mission (in a unique maintenance partnership with the City of Buffalo) by advocating for the protection of historic parkland, managing its growth, and sustaining its integrity for future generations.

Planning & Actions:

Since 2004 the BOPC has served as the City's appointed guardian and steward of these special Olmsted public parklands, and manages an advocacy relationship in partnership with its cultural brethren, providing the cultural landscape venue for these public institutions. In 2008, the BOPC published its Master Planning document; the "Plan for the 21st Century," which outlines the Conservancy's vision for park system restoration, capital project priorities, and future funding needs. This document has recently been updated with a 2020-2024 project and advocacy focus.

In 2010, a supplemental document of BOPC "Design Guidelines" was created in order to educate the public on the decision-making process and details expected for responsible and consistent development, as per Olmsted's vision. These Design Guidelines assist in keeping the appropriate character with the historic landscape.

Position:

It is the BOPC's position that any plan for new development, construction, expansion or renovation proposed within or bordering the Olmsted Parks shall acknowledge and reference the BOPC Design Guidelines. The BOPC will actively oppose any plan that extends beyond the deeded legal property footprint. The BOPC will not support the

appropriation of historic greenspace for any purpose, regardless of established lease agreements with the City of Buffalo, County of Erie, or State of New York.

Scrutiny of Intrusions to Park Landscape

The BOPC is dedicated to the preservation and restoration of the Olmsted park system in Buffalo. Any proposed intrusion shall be addressed by avoidance, minimization, and mitigation.

There are a few specific areas of concern regarding growth and development of the various and prestigious cultural institutions near or within the Olmsted Park System. Among those concerns are parking lots, and any structural impacts resulting in degradation of historic topography, vegetation, circulation patterns, and view-sheds.

Avoidance

The BOPC opposes paving over historic parkland and the removal of any vegetation or recreational space to create or to expand parking lots. The BOPC urges cultural partners to seek out other means of utilizing existing parking or other currently paved surfaces for patron automobiles and transportation and to avoid the taking of Olmsted parkland.

Minimization

The BOPC supports development consistent with its Design Guidelines, as long as it is not out of context with the site, does not negatively impact the natural Olmstedian aesthetic, and does not adversely impact the view-shed to or from the historic landscape. Any intrusion on Olmsted parkland, if not completely avoided, must be minimized.

Mitigation:

Typically the BOPC follows the guidance of the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation as it pertains to considering any mitigation measures as part of a proposed expansion project within the Olmsted landscape. Mitigation is the third step in resolving an adverse impact to a historic property, following all efforts towards avoidance and minimization. Several factors are considered in the evaluation of acceptable mitigation measures, including: integrity of impacted parkland, overall impact on park-user experience, public merits of proposed project and the value of parkland betterment recommendations. If mitigation is deemed appropriate, the BOPC Design Review Committee will evaluate projects on a case by case basis, ensuring mitigation measures far outweigh the negative impacts, in making recommendations to the Board of Trustees for resolution.

The City of Buffalo is the property owner and landlord authority of all public parks. The BOPC and City operate in a public-private partnership for the maintenance of the Olmsted parks, as well as collaborate on park capital projects and improvement priorities. The mission of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, is to promote, preserve, restore, enhance and ensure maintenance of Olmsted Parks and Parkways in the Greater Buffalo area to guarantee Olmsted Park experiences for current and future generations.

This position statement is fluid and ongoing in meeting the mission and resolve of the BOPC.