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Metro Parks bringing former golf course back to natural life

January 30, 2020

By Brian Lisik



The first phase of Summit Metro Parks' restoration of the former Valley View Golf Club on Cuyahoga Street has included seeding the area with a natural prairie mix. Photo courtesy of Summit Metro Parks



The Summit Metro Parks' project has included cooperative efforts with FirstEnergy to build a combined bike trail-access road to a FirstEnergy tower on the property, and the City of Akron to intercept water from a storm sewer on Cuyahoga Street, bringing water onto the property to restore aquatic wildlife and act as a natural water purifier. Photo:

Brian Lisik

NORTH AKRON — Summit Metro Parks visitors will soon have a chance to explore a 200-acre area in Cascade Valley Metro Park that has been, quite literally, a century in the making.

“The Olmsted Brothers designed parks all over the United States, Europe and Canada, and in 1925, Frederick Olmsted recommended that ‘Valley View’ be acquired for its natural beauty,” said Summit Metro Parks Chief of Conservation Mike Johnson at a recent community meeting at the Highland Square Branch Library on the Valley View Golf Club restoration project. “It took us a hundred years, but we finally got it.”

In the years following the renowned landscape architect’s suggestion, the Valley View area was home to a dairy farm and, eventually, the Valley View Golf Club — located at 1212 Cuyahoga St. — that the park system purchased for \$4 million in 2016.

Over the years, various property owners had built up the banks of the section of the Cuyahoga River running through the property and bordering the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail; installed drainage tile to divert water off the surface of the property; and dramatically reshaped or removed many elements of the “natural beauty” to which Olmsted had referred.

Johnson called the property acquisition and restoration vital to the park district for a number of reasons — not the least of these being Valley View’s position as a “linchpin” connecting Cascade Valley Park to Sand Run Park and Gorge Park, for a total of 1,900 contiguous acres.

First phase of restoration complete

The \$1.14 million first phase of the Valley View restoration has been completed, Johnson said, funded through a Clean Ohio grant with a \$500,000 local match. Other funding partners include the Great Lakes Commission, Lake Erie Commission, Cuyahoga River Area of Concern (AOC), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Clean Ohio Conservation Fund.



Summit Metro Parks Chief of Conservation Mike Johnson is shown inside the 1800s-era barn at the Valley View area. The former Valley View Golf Club clubhouse is being renovated for parks programming and public rental use. Photo:

Brian Lisik

Planning and design of the second and final stage of the restoration project has been funded by a \$500,000 NOAA grant, with construction to begin this year. Stephanie Walton, chief of marketing and communications for Summit Metro Parks, said full development of this park will occur in phases, and will only take place as funding allows.

“Just about all of the work has been grant-funded to date, and we plan to continue to successfully compete for state and federal funding to complete this project,” Walton said.

The first phase of the restoration process has included the ongoing renovation of the former golf course clubhouse — a dairy barn dating to the 1800s — that will eventually be used for both park programming and public rentals, as well as the removal of any vestige of the golf course itself.

Native grasses, plants, wetlands, flood plains and waterways have been returned to the property in a number of natural and not-so-natural ways, Johnson explained.

With Phase 1 funding coming in nearly \$1 million short of what Metro Parks officials had originally hoped for, a tree-planting plan was changed to a nut planting campaign. A call for nut donations and volunteers was put out by the Metro Parks, with shocking results over the next six months, officials said.

“We thought, ‘we’ll get a few Boy Scouts for a couple days,’ and we ended up with a half-million nuts of all species that needed packed and stored [until planting season],” Johnson said.

Over the course of two days, more than 600 volunteers planted nuts that will grow to an estimated 120,000 trees, designated by species for flood plains, wetlands and riparian areas.



The second phase of Summit Metro Parks' Valley View restoration project will include the reshaping of a section of the Cuyahoga River bank to restore 60 acres of flood plain and allow water access for kayaking. Photo: Brian Lisik

"Of course, they won't all grow to trees, but a tree on average absorbs 88 pounds of carbon in one year," Johnson said. "That could be 1 billion pounds of carbon taken out of the atmosphere and into wood over the 100-year life of the forest."

Phase 1 of the park project also has included 3,000 linear feet of stream restoration and accessing former drainage tile under the property, as well as working with the City of Akron to intercept water from a storm sewer on Cuyahoga Street, to bring water to the surface of the Valley View property — a process that has begun to both restore aquatic wildlife and act as a natural water purifier.

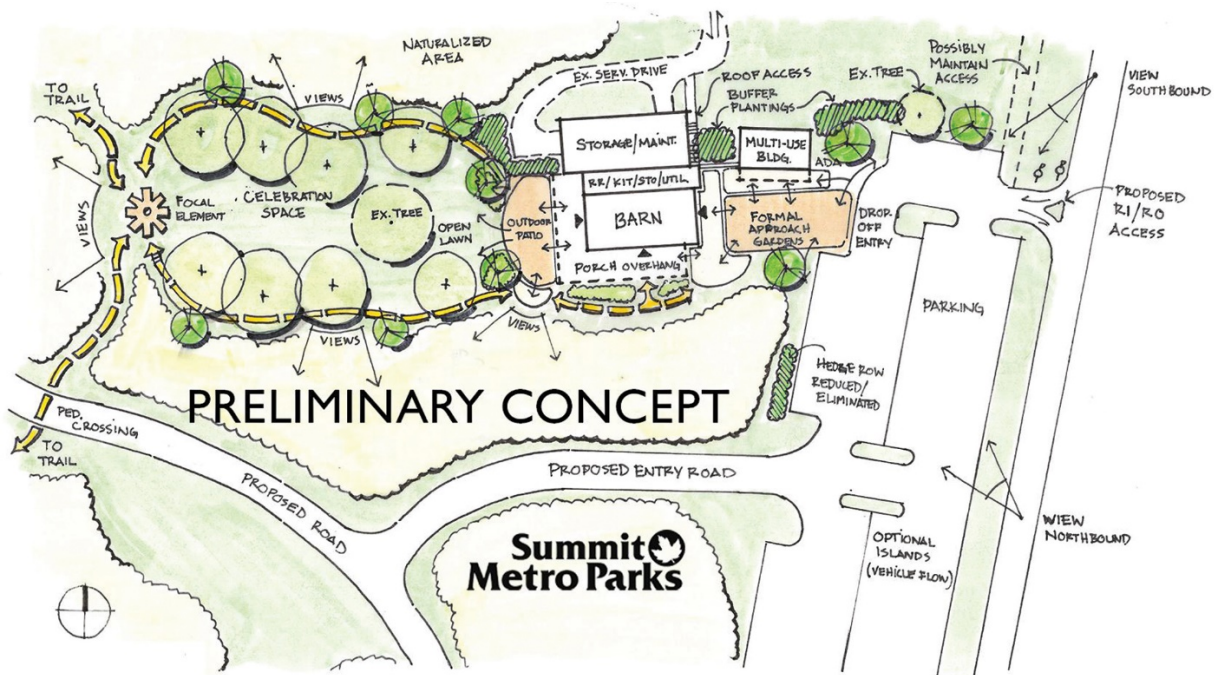
Johnson said visitors will be able to explore Valley View's "prototype trail," a natural walkway leading hikers to some of the more picturesque amenities in the park that he likened to natural trails at the Springfield Bog Metro Park, this year.

Final phase

Johnson said Phase 2, also expected to be completed by late 2020 or early 2021, is expected to include nearly 1 mile more of stream restoration; continued ecological restoration; and "major construction," including the movement of an estimated 40,000 cubic yards of dirt to lower the banks of the Cuyahoga River and restore 60 acres of natural flood plain.

This latter effort will result in water access for kayakers at Valley View. With long range, as-yet-unfunded plans to remove the dam at Gorge Metro Park dam, Johnson said more adventurous park visitors will be able to experience "Class 2 to Class 5" whitewater rapids

from Gorge Park to the placid waters at Valley View, likely within the next decade. Other future plans include more walking trails, some with park observation areas; construction of an event center; and a bike path connector trail over the river. “We considered keeping it as a public golf course,” Johnson said. “But we decided that was not a good use of taxpayers’ money. With the Cuyahoga River, the Towpath Trail, the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, I see [Valley View] as a world-class recreation destination.”



Summit Metro Parks’ purchase of the 200-acre Valley View property now connects nearly 2,000 acres of parkland between the Cascade Valley, Sand Run and Gorge Metro Parks. The rendering above shows plans for the new park. Rendering courtesy of Summit Metro Parks