

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh

2024 Annual Report



Friends of the Marsh,

Like a holiday letter to the family, it's time for us at the start of a new year to check in with you, our *Friends of the Marsh* family. We hope you had a healthy and happy 2024.

Our organization is now twelve years old, and still constant to our original mission, "*To preserve, protect, and enhance the La Crosse River Marsh and serve the community through action, advocacy, and education.*"

Constant in an age of transformation. Thanks to an atmospheric river in May that soaked northern Minnesota and Wisconsin we experienced the third highest June flood here at home. The marsh filled up, trails were closed, and the marsh critters had it almost to themselves. Before that and for the rest of 2024 it was relatively dry and that has carried on into this winter.

The marsh is an urban wetland, as we know, and that was demonstrated this summer by the persistent challenges posed by unhoused community members. Anticipating flooding the WDNR ordered a large homeless encampment removed from the floodplain along the Black River. Many moved to higher ground, camping along the Vietnam Veterans Trail and at other locations scattered throughout the marsh. Faced with two resolutions at the city Board of Public Works to prohibit camping in the marsh, I spoke to the committee opposing the very idea of camping in the marsh (it is remote from service, inaccessible, and at that time tinder dry) but also in opposition to the resolutions

at hand as there were no provisions for where the homeless could go. Nonetheless, the second resolution passed and shortly thereafter the city cleared the camps in the marsh, dispersing the homeless across the city. How to make a bad situation worse.

That said, here's our report to you.

Chuck Lee

Planning for the Future

We are party to a few exciting projects, stakeholders in ongoing city efforts. Here's a snapshot look.

- **The La Crosse River Marsh Restoration Project.** Begun in 2020 with the City Parks, Recreation, and Forestry Department in the lead, this project has three priorities: 1) improved wetland hydrology, 2) protect and build habitat, and 3) maintain sustainable trails. The strategy adopted for the project is to address hydrology improvement first and by doing so improve both habitat and trails. The goal is to move water through the marsh and see some seasonal variation in water depths. We should see some construction later this year on the Grand Crossing Trail that will include larger openings strategically placed under the trail to better facilitate the movement of water, both in and out; hardening the spillway so that it doesn't wash out with each high-water episode; a new asphalt surface for the entire length of the trail.
- **River Point Natural Area.** Cross the La Crosse River on the footbridge at the north end of Riverside Park and you will be in what will become the River Point Natural Area. See a perched wetland on your right and a sandy prairie and a floodplain forest on your left. This area is slated to become a natural respite between the mixed-use development to the north and the city center to the south. The plan is for low, minimally maintained vegetation, open sightlines, undeveloped wetland, and no permanent structures. We shared the cost, with Parks, of a vegetation inventory and planting / maintenance plan for this area done by Neil Diboll of Prairie Nursery

- **PAH (Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) Remediation.** On the south edge of the marsh in Myrick Park and near the Cottonwood Trail trailhead some trees will be removed and the slope excavated to remove one of the legacies of the old shooting club, clay pigeon shards contaminated with PAH. In the process this should improve sightlines out over the marsh and access to the Cottonwood Trail.



Outreach and Education

For several years we have partnered with The Nature Place to offer monthly programs on a variety of environmental subjects. Free and open to the public, *Enviro-Wednesdays* is the first Wednesday of each month. Watch for announcements via email or on our Facebook page.

www.facebook.com/friendsofthelacrossemarsh

A new opportunity presented itself this year when the city offered Youth Climate Action Fund (YCAF) grants to individuals ages 15-24 courtesy of a Bloomberg Philanthropies grant to the city. Each proposal had to feature a mentoring and fiscal agent non-profit, which is where we came in. Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins and Chuck Lee shouldered the mentoring task. A group of five Aquinas High School students produced brief audio recordings featuring each of the marsh trails with information about the trail itself, nearby habitat, and the significance of the marsh with reference to the city's Climate Action Plan. Scan

the QR codes linked to each audio attached to the trail kiosks or click the link to each audio on our web page.

www.friendsofthelacrossrivermarsh.com



Our Wetland Community

We could not accomplish what we do each year without your help. This year we benefitted from a total of 670 hours of volunteer help. Board members and volunteers gave their time and effort to surveys, programs and work outings, including:

- ***The Great Backyard Bird Count.*** Conducted on the second weekend of February each year, this citizen science survey is organized by the Cornell University Ornithology Lab and Audubon Society. It's a world-wide effort to measure bird populations from year to year. Here, volunteers count in our "backyard," the marsh.

- ***Frog and Toad Chorus Survey.*** Three times each spring and summer we ask for help with this statewide survey. Amphibians are key indicator species of environmental health. In addition to chorus frogs, grey tree frogs, leopard frogs, green frogs, and American toads, we have recently documented the presence of Blanchard's cricket frogs, a rare and endangered species in Wisconsin.
- ***Water Quality.*** Along with other agencies and groups we have compiled a multi-year record of water quality in the marsh, testing for nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus, and chloride.
- ***Earth Fair.*** We help support and exhibit at Earth Fair every April. Long the primary Earth Day celebration in La Crosse, the fair is now organized by the Sustainability Institute at WTC.
- ***Marsh Cleanup.*** In conjunction with Earth Fair in April we organize a trash and litter cleanup in the marsh. It's a big effort and we attract a lot of volunteers. Additionally, the last couple of years we have had a second cleanup along Lang Drive in the fall.
- ***Homeless Camp Cleanup.*** On an as-needed basis we help clean up abandoned homeless camps in the marsh. This year the largest such camp was along the Veterans Trail and on the floodplain below that trail. We are limited in what we accomplish with these camps by the volume of trash and the tools available to us to do the work.
- ***Habitat.*** The marsh features perhaps the most diverse natural habitat in the city. We have tried to build upon that biodiversity by planting native trees and shrubs, seeding perennials, and cutting and removing invasives like buckthorn and honeysuckle, each time with help from volunteers. We have also helped maintain trails by cutting back woody vegetation along the edges.

- **Trail Use Survey.** With the help of over thirty volunteers we conducted a trail use survey, recording walkers and bikers along the five trails in the marsh over one day in June, one in August, and two more in October. A previous trail use survey was conducted in the 1990s, so this was overdue. We noted at its conclusion:

The **overall number of trail uses** was surprisingly large. For example, on Thursday, October 10, we counted 638 uses during the three survey hours. Extrapolating, it seems likely that during 10 daylight hours, at least 2,000 uses occurred. Even on a low-count day we tallied 216 uses.

It appears **weather** influenced numbers more than whether we counted on a weekend day or a weekday and whether we counted in summer or fall



Fiscal Year 2024

Income

Donations and Memberships	5,642.35
Climate Action Grant	<u>5,000.00</u>
total	\$10,642.35

Expenses

Wis Wetlands Conference	550.00
Insurance	265.00
Marketing (Earth Fair)	250.00
Post Office Box	176.00
First Aid Kit	60.09
Pay Pal Fees	10.62
Lab testing	558.00
Consulting Fee (Neil Diboll)	<u>4,965.00</u>
total	\$6,834.71

Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh Board of Directors

Chuck Lee, President

John Sullivan, Treasurer

Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins, Secretary

Karen Acker

Sue Knopf

Nancy Heerens-Knudson

Ralph Knudson

The Board wishes to thank John Sullivan and Carolyn Mahlum-Jenkins for their dedication, support, and work through these last several years. John and Carolyn have left the board. Our very best to true friends of the marsh.

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Web Page: www.friendsofthelacrosserivermarsh.com

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Friends of the La Crosse River Marsh

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