

November 7, 2018

I am writing on behalf of the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden, Inc., as its president. We are a 66 year old citizens' support organization for the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and Bird Sanctuary in Theodore Wirth Park. We are an active, invested and knowledgeable group of citizens devoted to the well being of the Garden. We have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of structures, hardscaping, plant materials, and thousands of hours of services. We, the Friends, have more than 225 lifetime and dues-paying members. Our popular website draws between 2,500 and 4,500 unique visits each week.

Our activities include recruiting, training and scheduling volunteers who supplement MPRB staffing at the Martha Crone Visitor Center, removing invasive plants from the Garden and its margins, and publishing a beautiful and informative newsletter, the Fringed Gentian. The Friends have made significant donations of Garden amenities including the Martha Crone Visitor Shelter and more recently, the award-winning boardwalk through the Garden's wetland.

We appreciate that producing a budget for an organization like the Minneapolis park system is a demanding task, and we respect the effort. However, we must respectfully object to any cuts to the Garden budget.

### The Garden's Purpose

The Garden is a quiet place where Minneapolis residents from all walks of life and points of view come together to rest, think and encounter each other. Differences fall away there, and the Garden becomes a cradle of peace where a common affinity for nature creates common ground. On any given day, visitors speaking languages from European, Asian and African countries can be heard conversing there. The availability of this place every day of the week, from early morning through evening ensures that whenever a person's daily schedule permits a visit, the Garden will be open to them.

Visitors to the Martha Crone Shelter in the Garden have increased from about 8,000 in 2007 to more than 14,000 in 2017. Not all Garden visitors enter the Shelter. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the number of visitors to the Garden itself can be arrived at by multiplying the number of Shelter visitors by between 4 and 6. This means that there were between 56,000 and 84,000 visits to the Garden in 2018.

The Garden hosts families, scout troops, youth clubs, school groups, early childhood care centers/schools, recreational-based youth groups, homeschool groups – children are ever present in the Garden. It is a place where they can safely play and learn in the woods located in the center of the city.

Educational STEM programming is a key function of the Garden. In 2018, 588 children were served in fee-based public programs, and 1,079 children were served in special (non-public) programs. Please see Attachment A for a list of the schools served. The Friends fund a transportation program that ensures access to the Garden for programming. Programs explore history, science and aesthetics. Please review the public program summaries attached as Attachment B, and the fee-based course titles attached as Attachment C.

### Opening and Closing Schedule

The proposed budget suggests changing the Garden's opening and closing dates. The Friends strongly oppose abbreviating the Garden season. The Garden normally opens April 1, if paths are dry enough. In 7

of the last 12 years, the Garden has been able to open on or about April 1. In other years, the paths have been too wet. With the boardwalk's completion this fall, path condition will be less of an issue and a regular April 1 opening will be possible. This is important in part because the Garden boasts the presence of the snow trillium, a species of special concern in Minnesota. The opportunity to see it blooming is a highlight of the spring for many, as is the chance to see the early spring flowering of the witch hazel (rare in Minnesota) as well as the hazelnut, with its early spring fuchsia blooms.

October sees some of the most favorably reviewed visits to the Garden. At the Friends' recent volunteer recognition event, the possibility of losing October hours was a matter of significant and vocal concern. This most beautiful season in the Garden must not be eliminated. Because of the unique topography of the Garden, the fall is a particularly beautiful time to view the contours of the land, carpeted with the bright colors of fallen leaves. Because so much of the other public spaces in the city are covered with invasive buckthorn, the Garden provides an unusual opportunity to see a Big Woods type environment without driving an hour or more from the city.

### Weekly Schedule

The proposed cuts also include closing one day a week during the proposed abbreviated season, because "Monday closures are not uncommon for museums and botanical gardens." The University of Minnesota maintains a list of public gardens in Minnesota. Using that list, I surveyed the gardens' hours. There are no public gardens that close on Mondays in Minnesota (other than the Bakken Garden that closes Mondays because the only way to access it is through the museum that is closed on Mondays). The Garden staff has always been able to complete its work with visitors present with safety precautions taken as needed, and have not requested that the Garden be closed so they could work. We are not persuaded that closing the Garden one day a week is necessary for a Minnesota garden of this size that is so very popular, and strongly oppose shortening the Garden's season opening and closing.

### Daily Schedule

We understand that there is some support for changing the hours each day that the Garden is open, with a standard closing time at night, rather than tying the closing time to sunset. While it is a charming tradition to close the Garden at a time tied to the sunset, we also understand that the standardization of the closing hours may give staff a more regular schedule, as well as reducing confusion on the part of the public as to the Garden's hours.

### Reduction in Staffing Hours

The proposed budget cuts require reduction in FTEs or in hours or both. But the demand for programming at the Garden exceeds available staff as it is. And, the public programs are often fee-based. We have been told that some requests for programming are currently denied for lack of staff. These public and educational programs offer opportunities for outdoor exercise and education for children and fit the Garden's purpose. So long as there is a demand, FTEs and hours should be increased, not decreased.

In fact, we believe that a way should be found to make the Environmental Education Program Coordinator at the Garden into a full time position. Trained personnel serving as Coordinator have resigned to take other opportunities that provide a reliable living wage and schedule. When this happens, it becomes necessary to recruit and train replacements, at avoidable expense. This training is conducted by the Curator, during the busiest time of the season and competes for her time that could be spent doing work

more suited to her special expertise. The Coordinator then needs to develop curricula, programming and materials, to schedule sessions and to engage in outreach to ensure availability of programming to as many people as possible. During the winter when the Garden is closed, if it were a full time position, the Coordinator could be engaging in outreach, priming the education program to provide a unique learning opportunity in the natural sciences to school children through the city. The position should be fully funded as a permanent full time position.

### Summary

No cuts to the Garden budget should be considered, because available data do not support the specific reductions. The Environmental Education Program Coordinator position should be made a full time position, beginning immediately, because the Coordinator can create programming that will generate revenue, and enrich the experiences of hundreds of school children in STEM education.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments, and for your consideration. I ask that this letter and attachments be included in the public record for the administration and finance committee meeting tonight.

Best,

Kathy Connelly

President,  
Friends of the Wildflower Garden, Inc.