

**Re: Park District of Oak Park
Cheney Mansion Site Master Plan**

**Subject: Focus Group Meetings, October 1, 2009
Cheney Mansion, 220 N. Euclid Avenue**

Attendees: Governmental Entity Focus Group – 1pm
Craig Failor, Village Planning and Community Development
Bill McKenna, Village Engineering
Courtney Sakellaris, Oak Park River Forest High School
Officer Rafael Murphy, Oak Park Police Department
Sara Faust, Oak Park Development Corp
Christine Graves, Park District of Oak Park
Jim Madigan, Oak Park Public Library
Commander Keenan Williams, Oak Park Police Department (part time)
Gary Balling, Park District of Oak Park (introduction only)

Park District of Oak Park Staff Focus Group– 3pm
Mike Grandy, Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds
Neil Adams, Project Manager
Bob Foster, West Suburban Special Recreation Association
Nancy Holmes, Memorial Trust Committee
Gary Balling, Park District of Oak Park (introduction only)

Cheney Mansion Staff Focus Group – 6pm
Charlie Ruedebusch, Head Gardner
Jean Kwas
Kakie Conroy-Lovaas
Karen Bara
Mark Gartland
Christine Graves, Park District of Oak Park
Diane Stanke, Park District of Oak Park (introduction only)

Community Organizations Focus Group – 7pm
Bob Sjoström, Universal Access Commission
Laura Thompson, Pleasant Home Foundation
Sam Gray, Catered by Design
Bonnie Katz, Catered by Design
Christine Graves, Park District of Oak Park
Diane Stanke, Park District of Oak Park (introduction only)

Present for all meetings
Ted Wolff, Wolff Landscape Architecture
Ben Baker, Wolff Landscape Architecture
Linda Peterson, Cheney Mansion

Four focus group meetings were held at the Cheney Mansion on Thursday, October 1, 2009. A prepared list of talking points (attached) was reviewed and then the floor was opened to other items. The discussion and points of agreement / disagreement were broken down into the following categories, and the responses are as follows:

1. Parkway and Streetscape

- A bike rack or racks should be installed, probably near the site entry on Euclid.
- Signage, which is currently laminated paper zip-tied to the fence, should be upgraded.
- Better project identify, either a sign or other means, would be appropriate and beneficial, likely located in the southwest corner of the block near the intersection of Euclid and Ontario.
- Historic slate sidewalk was thought to be an asset from a historic and an aesthetic perspective.
- Slate sidewalk condition is variable, with some of the slate pavers broken or flaking / delaminating, and others missing and replaced poured-in-place with concrete, and the resulting "patchwork" is considered unattractive and a negative characteristic.
- Slate sidewalk is more difficult to maintain from an operational / snow clearing perspective than a concrete sidewalk; the majority opinion was that the positive historic and aesthetic aspects of the slate sidewalk outweighed the negative operational aspects.
- Landscape near the fence acts to screen parts of the house and grounds and offers intermittent views into the site; nearer to the building, however, there are larger gaps in the perimeter planting that provide more direct views to the front of the mansion, which was considered desirable.
- Fence was restored recently and is in good condition, is a contributing factor to the character of the site, and should not be changed.
- A potential new entrance to the grounds on the south portion of the property (off of Ontario Street) was discussed. However, all parties were concerned that the site might become a cut-through for Oak Park and River Forest High School (OPRFHS) students. Concerns were also raised about the impact of a second entrance on events when the grounds are closed to the public. If a second gate is contemplated, it should be installed on Euclid rather than Ontario and it should have a lockable gate to use during events.
- A designated handicap parking space should be added on Euclid Street near the site entry.

2. Site Entrance

- Three of the four focus groups thought that the entrance to the site was problematic and unclear or not obvious. Many users were unsure whether to use the pedestrian entrance or the driveway entrance.
- The third focus group, the Cheney Mansion staff, thought that the site identity and entrance were clear and not problematic.
- It is not clear whether or not the site is open to the public.
- The building entrance should be visible from the site entrance.

- Most thought that the ornamental trees (burning bush) at the entrance were too large and the entry felt too tight.
- Some thought, however, that walking through the entrance gave the sense that you were entering a new space, at least in part because of the enclosure provided by the ornamental trees.
- All agreed that the entrance had inadequate lighting, and that this, combined with the enclosure provided by ornamental trees, made the entrance uncomfortable and a little intimidating.

3. Site Security

- The Oak Park Police Department (OPPD) stated that they have not had many issues with the site. The mansion is more like a large residential property than a park. Many thought that one of the reasons the site did not have some of the security issues associated with other parks is the lack of knowledge that the site is Park District property and open to the public.
- Lighting could be added to help with security concerns. One option would be floodlights on a motion detector; many thought this might be intrusive. Another option would be site lighting that illuminated the trees or the fence such that the silhouettes of people on the property could be seen against that illuminated background. A majority of the attendees thought that strategic uplighting of trees and other small landscape lights would be a benefit for the events on site, but were unsure whether the lighting should be turned on during nights when events were not occurring.
- Lighting at the front entry should be increased so visitors feel safe at night.

4. ADA Access

- It was agreed that the current accessible route to the mansion, via the metal ramps laid over the existing steps, was not an acceptable long-term or permanent solution.
- It was agreed that the accessible route needed to connect the driveway and pedestrian entry walk to the front and first floor of the mansion.
- Most agreed that the front door would be the ideal place for the accessible route to terminate. However, it was also noted that there are some potential architectural issues with ramp access to this location because of the two steps at the front door and the columns which frame the front door, the bases of which are below the floor level. Most thought that entering the building via the solarium would be acceptable if providing access to the front door were excessively problematic with respect to architectural or other issues. All agreed that the accessible entrance must be at the front of the Mansion, not at a back or side door.
- The final accessible route should blend into the look of the mansion, and should not significantly alter the appearance from the street.
- ADA access to the grounds was discussed. The focus groups questioned whether or not the grounds required an accessible route through the gardens or to specific locations typically used by events. Access to the back patio or tent on the south side of the building is around the north and east sides of the building, a relatively long and indirect route.

5. Site Elements

- The greenhouse was discussed. It was generally agreed that it was an asset to the site, however, it was also understood that it is in a state of severe disrepair such that it is not safe to use. The majority of participants felt that if funds were available to restore the greenhouse, that it should be restored. However, the groups also questioned how long the greenhouse could be left in its current deteriorating condition.
- The water-feature was discussed. While most participants thought the water-feature was an asset, most agreed that it was not visible due to the overgrown yews, and that the pool at the bottom could be a liability due to its depth. It was generally agreed that altering the water feature to remove the deep pool, or installing a new water feature, should be considered.
- A number of persons thought that public art could or should be incorporated into the gardens, either in temporary installations or as a rotation of pieces in designated locations.
- Catered by Design stated that the catering aspect of events would be easier if box trucks could access the site via the entry at the alley (currently it is too narrow) and if there was a ramp to the kitchen access.

6. Site Landscape

- All groups agreed that the landscape on the site has improved greatly since the PDOP took over the property, and has continued to improve yearly.
- Charlie Ruedebusch, the head gardener, stated that he feels the landscape is currently as complex as it can be with the resources and hours the Park District currently has allotted for its care.
- All groups like the annual plantings and feel that they are necessary to provide the additional seasonal color and interest that people or groups renting the mansion expect.
- PDOP staff stated that, while they like the current arboretum or estate and garden feel, they would like to consider a landscape plan that had more massing and fewer individual plants.
- PDOP staff would like to consider an automatic irrigation system for the site.

Prepared by Ben Baker and Ted Wolff of WLA. The foregoing represents the writers' understanding of the matters discussed and the comments and directions given.