Due to the recent increase in resident interest in the proposed plan to increase parking availability at Cosley Zoo on the east side of Gary Avenue, we are pleased to provide this update. The Wheaton Park District Board of Commissioners is exploring all options to achieve the goal of increasing visitor parking at the Zoo, including the parking lot options below; these plans are not finalized.

Founded in 1974 with a handful of domestic farm animals, Cosley Zoo has grown through Wheaton Park District’s investment and private citizen involvement and support at a slow and steady pace. This thoughtful growth has enabled Cosley to serve the Wheaton community in meaningful ways over the last five decades.

In 2017, Cosley Zoo completed its Master Plan. This plan represents a vision for the future of the zoo that focuses on advancing Cosley’s mission to create connections between people and animals that will inspire lifelong conservation of the natural world. The exhibits outlined in this long-term vision, may be phased in over the next 20-30 years as final designs are approved by the Wheaton Park District Board of Commissioners and funding sources are identified. A summary of the Master Plan is available at cosleyzoo.org.

Before any future zoo exhibits can be considered, our first task is to alleviate Cosley Zoo’s parking and therefore, public access limitations. Visitor access is significantly limited by the zoo’s 80-space parking lot that often reaches full capacity between April and October. On average, the parking lot capacity is reached 137 days every year, requiring us to turn visitors away. To provide increased visitor access, the Wheaton Park District allocated funds to acquire vacated residential properties on the east side of Gary Avenue to develop a new parking lot.

After several years of planning and design, a parking lot concept for the east side of Gary Avenue was developed that intended to ultimately replace the insufficiently sized parking lot on the west side of Gary Avenue. Initially, the parking lot design included 258 parking spaces to be constructed with permeable pavers to slow the rate of water runoff, promote water filtration, provide a water quality benefit and enhance aesthetics. City and county ordinances require storm water to be detained with a limited release rate. The parking lot would include a planting buffer that will exceed what is required by city ordinance and perimeter fencing to keep visitors within zoo property. The lot would continue to be used during the zoo’s hours of operation and for occasional evening events. Minimal LED lighting would be included to meet code requirements. Visitors would access the zoo from this new lot by crossing Gary Avenue safely at a new pedestrian crosswalk and stoplight which would be constructed at the intersection of Gary and Prairie Avenues. Independent of the park district’s concept for a new parking lot, the City of Wheaton is planning for a new traffic signal and turn lanes at this intersection as part of its Gary Avenue Improvement Project, which is anticipated to occur in 2024.

This initial parking lot concept was shared during a “Neighbor Night” event held at Cosley Zoo on July 11, 2023. As a result of feedback provided during and subsequent to the event, the Wheaton Park District continued to review the scope of the parking lot design concept and an alternate design was created. This revised design has been scaled down to 150 parking spaces. Please see below for the initial and revised parking lot design concepts.

In 2019, *Money Magazine* ranked Wheaton as the Best Place to Live in Illinois citing numerous community assets, including Cosley Zoo. Cosley Zoo is currently free to Wheaton Park District residents and all children 17 & under.
The residential properties that were acquired for the purpose of constructing the new parking lot are currently zoned R-3. There is no “Park” zoning in Wheaton. The majority of other parks in Wheaton are considered residential zoning. These properties formerly contained three homes, two of which were in advanced deterioration. These homes were demolished with required notice to those living within 250 feet. The former home and in-ground pool on the parcel furthest to the south was demolished to construct additional storm water detention storage. A small portion of this parcel will be required to provide an entrance to the parking lot that aligns with the new traffic signal being constructed at Prairie Avenue by the City of Wheaton. The small amount of displaced storm water detention storage will be replaced under the proposed parking lot.

The former residential properties upon which the new parking lot is proposed to be constructed are not environmentally sensitive and do not contain wetlands. A very small portion of one of the properties is within the 500-Year Flood Plain and that portion of the property will not be impacted by the proposed parking lot project (see map below). Should the Wheaton Park District Board of Commissioners determine that a parking lot will not be built on these properties which were purchased expressly for that purpose, the land will be sold to a developer.

Over the last five decades, the Wheaton Park District has made significant improvements to the Winfield Creek Watershed through the purchase and preservation of the 150-acre Lincoln Marsh and the ecological restoration of the Northside Park Lagoon and shorelines.
Wheaton Park District staff and the Board of Commissioners are aware of questions and concerns related to the project design concepts. Input has been provided directly to the district as well as through social media outlets and a change.org petition. All feedback regarding the parking lot is valued, and will assist the Wheaton Park District in finalizing its plans. Unfortunately, there are a number of misconceptions and inaccuracies circulating about the project design concepts. We have shared these below and provided factual responses.

**Concern:** The project will destroy wetland/protected areas.
**Response:** The former residential properties upon which the new parking lot is proposed to be constructed are not environmentally sensitive and do not contain wetlands. This will be verified by DuPage County during the permitting process.

**Concern:** Flooding will be increased.
**Response:** City of Wheaton and DuPage County ordinances do not allow an increase of storm water flow from any property. Once the parking lot is completed, rain that falls on the parking lot will be intercepted by the permeable pavement and curb surrounding the parking lot. Everything that falls within the lot will be diverted away from the adjacent homes. Water that falls onto the parking lot or flows into it will be directed to underground storage. The release of this water will be restricted over time towards the Winfield Creek as opposed to the current flow towards neighboring homes. Wheaton Park District will adhere to Municipal Code Sections 34-2 regarding storm water drainage and 34-98 regarding site run-off storage and release rate.

**Concern:** Traffic and congestion will be increased.
**Response:** The City of Wheaton has identified the need to make improvements along Gary Avenue. Currently the northern portion of Gary Avenue experiences various transportation issues and concerns, including capacity constraints and congestion, lack of left-turn lanes at intersections and access drives, and intersections that may warrant traffic signal control. The widening of Gary Avenue project scope is proposed to be from and including the intersections of Harrison Ave./Ellis Ave. to Jewell Road including further detail and analysis of the following: roadway widening for a three-lane cross-section, culvert lengthening at Winfield Creek for the proposed cross-section, pedestrian/bikeway multi-use path, traffic signals at Prairie Avenue, traffic signal and lane modifications at Jewell Road, and an intersection roundabout at Harrison/Ellis. This project is scheduled to be completed in 2024.

**Concern:** Pedestrians will unsafely cross the street.
**Response:** The proposed parking lot will have fencing along Gary Avenue to prevent pedestrians from crossing anywhere other than the new traffic signal and crosswalk.

**Concern:** Litter, pollution, noise, and lights will affect the neighbors.
**Response:** A significantly-sized landscape buffer and fence will be installed between the parking lot and the neighboring residential properties. By constructing a permeable parking lot, we can capture and clean vehicle pollutants rather than having them run off from the street parking that currently exists for overflow parking. The majority of use will be during the operating hours of the zoo. The lighting proposed for the parking lot will use LED technology to minimize light spill. Gates will be installed to prevent access to the lot after the zoo closes at 5pm.

**Concern:** The project was not publicized and done secretly.
**Response:** Since 2017, we have hosted multiple public meetings with the neighbors of the zoo to discuss these plans.

**Concern:** The property is not zoned for the proposed use.
**Response:** There is no “Park” zoning in Wheaton. The majority of Wheaton parks are parcels considered residential zoning. Should the Wheaton Park District Board of Commissioners determine that a parking lot will not be built on these properties which were purchased expressly for that purpose, the land will be sold to a developer.

**Concern:** The planned parking lot is as big as the Zoo.
**Response:** What is currently proposed is an approximately 68,710 s.f. parking lot that is equivalent to 1.58 acres. Cosley Zoo currently occupies approximately 4 acres. However, the existing parking lot on the west side of Gary Avenue is another 1 acre for a total of 5 acres.

**Concern:** The project is not aligned with the mission statement of the Zoo.
**Response:** The mission of the zoo is “To create connections between people and animals that will inspire lifelong conservation of the natural world.” Increasing visitor access to the zoo will allow us to further that mission.

**Concern:** Property values will be diminished by this project.
**Response:** Having a strong park district enhances the property values within a community. Further, real estate sales demonstrate that this type of development is not detrimental to neighboring property values.

**ESTIMATED TIMELINE FOR THE PROJECT**
Continued Design Concept Review by Park District Board | October-December 2023
Final Design Approved by Park District Board | December 2023-January 2024
City Permit Submittal | TBD Pending Final Park Board Approval of Parking Lot Design

Questions? Please contact Michael Benard, Executive Director, at mbenard@wheatonparks.org.