

In Support of the Proposed Agreement to Purchase Lands at Cherokee Marsh

Friends of Cherokee Marsh and the Upper Yahara Watershed

Why is Cherokee Marsh important?

Cherokee Marsh is strategically located to serve many important wetland functions in the Yahara Watershed. The marsh improves water quality in the Yahara River and its associated lakes by discharging large volumes of cold, clean groundwater into them. At the same time, the marsh acts as a filter capturing some of the runoff from upstream agricultural and construction sites in Dane County reducing the amount of sediment, nutrients and pollutants that enter the lakes. In times of high precipitation, the marsh acts as a sponge, tempering high flood surges before they enter the lakes.

Cherokee Marsh contains the Cherokee State Natural Area including large areas of native wetland vegetation, including groundwater-fed fen communities that contain many rare plant species, and provides habitat for a rich variety of wildlife including birds, waterfowl, reptiles, and amphibians. The Marsh is a place to learn about wetland ecosystems and to experience a sense of being close to nature. Many educators and naturalists use the outstanding diversity of the marsh to educate students and the public. Development in Dane County has threatened the few remaining areas of native wetland ecosystem, making Cherokee Marsh especially important.

Why is it important for the public to purchase wetlands at Cherokee?

The purchase of the Cherokee wetlands east Sherman Avenue and north of Wheeler Road is necessary in order to protect, restore and enhance the wetland functions of Cherokee Marsh. Why?

1. The City of Madison will be able to repair years of damage to this part of the marsh and maintain its good health.

Over the years, attempts to drain and farm this area have degraded the supporting deep peat. Ditches and drainage tiles dug into the peat channel groundwater away and have allowed the peat to oxidize. The oxidation releases nutrients stored in the peat allowing them to be carried away. Where runoff and stored nutrients have discharged into the marsh, invasive trees,

shrubs and grasses have taken over, choking out the native species. As a result, the native plant and animal diversity have been severely reduced.

As part of the Cherokee Park Conservancy, the City will be able to fill in the old drainage ditches, remove invasive trees and other vegetation, and restore the native habitat for wetland birds, waterfowl and other wetland species.

2. Good management of the wetlands will protect the neighboring Cherokee State Natural Area.

The ditches dug into the peat carry sediment and nutrients into the bordering Cherokee State Natural Area (SNA). This has allowed invasive species to encroach into the SNA.

The location of the purchasable marshland dovetails with the airport restoration project at Cherokee, since it is adjacent to that ongoing mitigation effort. The wetland functions of the marsh as a whole will benefit from the expanded restoration area.

3. City management of the area west of Comanche Way will benefit the lakes.

The purchase negotiations will allow the City to improve the land north of Wheeler west of Comanche Way, which has also been neglected and degraded for decades. Currently, drainage ditches in this area channel runoff water directly into Yahara River and Lake Mendota. Putting in catch basins and/or detention ponds to stop the flow of water will be a positive change for the lakes. Sediment, nutrients and pollutants, would have more time to settle out, or be incorporated into plants, before discharge to the Yahara. Removing the invasive species will give the natural plants and trees space to grow and flourish.

4. Public ownership will protect the land from future development.

Right now the wetlands are protected from development by state and federal laws, but laws can change. Population growth in the Madison area will almost certainly put pressure on the right to develop that land in the future. Furthermore, illegal filling and draining, such as has occurred in the past, could convert wetland to land considered available for development. Public ownership would protect the wetlands from such activities.

What is the value of the upland acres included in the land sale?

1. The purchase of land north of the golf course (within the "5th Addition") preserves a needed buffer between residential development, the river and/or the marsh, and Cherokee Park. Once again removing the invasive species will give the natural plants and trees space to grow and flourish.

The "5th Addition" is now a corn field where agricultural runoff, including fertilizers and pesticides, flows directly into the marsh degrading the vegetation there. The City will restore the field to native upland vegetation to minimize degradation to the marsh.

2. The buffer will minimize light, noise and visual encroachment into the Cherokee Park Conservancy from the proposed new residential areas.
3. The uplands will protect a needed groundwater recharge area to provide clean groundwater into the wetlands.
4. The buffer area will provide needed upland habitat for those animal species that need both wetland and upland areas in their life cycle, to make a more viable wetland ecosystem.

Why purchase the land now?

This is the first time in over 30 years that Cherokee Park Inc. has been willing to sell property at Cherokee. With development pressure increasing in the Madison area, it is unlikely the upland would be available again. The Madison Common Council has approved development in all the areas proposed by Cherokee Park Inc., so the wetlands of Cherokee Marsh will need more protection than ever.

We can't emphasize strongly enough that this land is all in the Lake Mendota watershed and any improvement we can make will help us keep all the lakes in the chain cleaner. Lake Mendota and Lake Monona are now classified as impaired waters. Shouldn't we be working very hard to reverse the negative impact before we have a real environmental disaster? The lakes are our most precious resource.