

Save Our Meadows

I am writing to request that the Town work with the Parks Department to take steps to save our meadows as meadows.

The Washington Grove Conservation Park is an important ecological and recreational asset of the Town. Its protection from development was a win rightfully celebrated. Together with the lower meadow, formally the Piedmont Crossing Local Park, it forms an ecosystem for meadow species that is otherwise absent nearby. Retaining and maintaining the Conservation Meadow was specified in the Parks Department Operations and Use Plan (attached) which was assembled by Brenda Sandberg of the MC Parks Department in collaboration with a "Field Committee" of Grove residents. Mayor Darrell Anderson in 2011 designated Ernie Kawasaki as the Chair of this committee which continued to work with the Parks Department until the O&U Plan was approved by them in 2013 while Georgette Cole was Mayor.

On page 6 of the Plan, the Vision is:

The operation and use of Washington Grove Conservation Park will be implemented to achieve the following visions:

- Preservation of the rural, open vistas of the agricultural fields that formed the setting for the historically-significant Town of Washington Grove
- **Creation of a native meadow habitat to support native meadow species** (emphasis added)
- Provision for resource-based recreational opportunities and interpretive opportunities of the natural and cultural significance of the park

Unfortunately, on page 10 they also say: "Create areas within the meadow with woody, early successional vegetation to provide wildlife refuges."

The Field Committee came up with a plan for a modest number of red cedar "stands" for the wildlife refuge, but when Parks started mowing the field, they actually followed the directions on page 11 for the Meadow habitat:

Keep all existing native shrubs and trees that are taller than the deer browse limit (approx. 4-5') to provide a variety of habitats within the early successional meadow for birds and wildlife.

Species to retain include:

- i. Eastern Red Cedar
- ii. American Holly

The net result was leaving FAR more red cedars than the Field Committee recommended and that has never changed.

NOTE: NNIs are still abundant, and Parks still mows every spring even though they originally envisioned this gradually tapering off after year 5.

What Do Experts Say About Maintaining Meadows?

Here's what Audubon says about best practice to maintain a meadow: https://www.massaudubon.org/content/download/19413/file/Best-Management-Practices_Grasslands.pdf

In brief, meadows require an expanse where woody plants are excluded. From the article: "Grassland nesting birds are area dependent and edge sensitive: they will not nest in fields that are smaller than a certain size, and they tend to nest away from field edges, to avoid predation." An aerial view or walk through either meadow clearly shows that recommended conditions are not being met. Beyond the red cedar infiltration, the lower meadow also includes woody invasives, such as Bradford pears.

I asked Francis Smith, Natural Resources Planner II, Maryland Forest Service, Department of Natural Resources (580 Taylor Ave, E-1, Annapolis, MD 21401. francis.smith@maryland.gov (410) 260-8516 (Office)) if my understanding that allowing the growth of the red cedars was destroying the meadow ecosystem. His emailed reply:

"You are spot on with your thinking. I work with folks on the Eastern Shore who manage land for bobwhite restoration, among other bird species, and cedar is definitely an aggressive native that can turn a meadow into a monoculture dead zone. Even in terms of my agroforestry work and [it] being a host for rust disease which impacts serviceberry (species of untapped potential), cedar is a major pain in the butt!"

I further reached out to the Montgomery County Parks' Meadow Management and Restoration Program (<https://montgomeryparks.org/projects/directory/meadow-management-and-restoration-program/>). Here's how they define meadow management:

What is the meadow management program?

A meadow is a plant community composed almost entirely of herbaceous plants and some shrubs. Protecting these natural habitats allows native plants, insects, birds, and mammals to flourish and enrich the local environment. The goal of the meadow management program is to protect these natural habitats with minimal disturbance by staff. Occasional spot mowing and the use of brush cutters or chainsaws are used to control non-native invasive species and **keep woody vegetation low or out of meadow areas.** (Emphasis added)

I spoke with Dianne Loescher, Senior Natural Resources Specialist with Montgomery Parks (Dianna.Loescher@MontgomeryParks.org, 301-962-1346) about my concerns. She was well familiar with both the Conservation Meadow and Piedmont Crossing. She admitted that Parks was unsure how much work to do on Piedmont Crossing given the possibility that it will be paved over. She promised to come have a fresh look at both meadows and initiate a dialogue within the department about what should be done. She added that if the red cedars have been allowed to grow beyond a certain size, there's a regulation that would prevent their removal. I suggested that if the red cedars were destroying an ecosystem, there should be a way to amend or circumvent that regulation.

In summary, the meadows are an ecosystem that is in danger of ecological collapse, but we should be able to work with the Montgomery County Parks' Meadow Management and Restoration Program to prevent this from happening. I'm happy to volunteer if needed and to work with any other Grovers interested in maintaining the health of the meadows.

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