COOPER POND MASTER PLAN

A PLAN TO CREATE A NEW AND EXCITING HIKING DESTINATION AT OAKWOODS NATURE PRESERVE

Hancock Park District
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Cooper Pond Master Plan

Authored by:

Gary E. Pruitt, CPRP
Director
Hancock Park District

Reviewed by:

Jamie Shane
Administrative Operations Manager
Hancock Park District

Vicky Stozich
Business Manager
Hancock Park District

Michelle Rumschlag
Naturalist/Program Manager
Hancock Park District

Renee King
Park Manager West
Hancock Park District

Chad Carroll
Natural Resource Manager
Hancock Park District

Scott Egbert
Park Operations Manager
Hancock Park District

Approved by:

Edward D. Ingold
Chairperson
Hancock Park District Board of Park Commissioners

Scott C. Younger
Vice Chairperson
Hancock Park District Board of Park Commissioners

Richard L. Kidwell
Vice Chairperson
Hancock Park District Board of Park Commissioners

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South boundary of Cooper Pond

ON THE COVER: The scenic south side of Cooper Pond

INTRODUCTION

Cooper Pond consists of 18.291 acres, including a 12-acre pond. According to the AECOM Phase I Environmental Site Assessment dated July 15, 2024, the property was agricultural land from 1939 through 1960. Redevelopment of the property from agricultural land to a recreational pond occurred between 1960 and 1972, which would have included the excavation of soils. The pond was first observed in a 1972 aerial photograph.

In the 1970s, the Cooper Tire & Rubber Company owned Cooper Pond. Cooper Pond was leased to the Cooper Fishing Club. That arrangement lasted until 2024 when the new owner, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, donated the property to the Hancock Park District.

The Cooper Pond Master Plan considered the unique characteristics associated with the property and the management challenges that exist. Project goals include the following:

1. Expand Oakwoods Nature Preserve to include Cooper Pond
2. Enhance and preserve the scenic beauty of Cooper Pond
3. Keep site development to a minimum
4. Provide access for wildlife and pedestrians, and provide outdoor recreation opportunities
5. Create a new and exciting hiking destination at Oakwoods Nature Preserve

The Cooper Pond Master Plan focuses on the following four sections:

1. Wildlife Friendly Fences, Boundary Markers, and Barriers to Vehicle Access
2. Signs, Park Regulations, and Law Enforcement
3. Vehicle Parking, Trails, and Pedestrian Access
4. Maintenance, Demolition, and Park Improvements

Throughout the master planning process, the proximity of Cooper Pond to County Road 144 made it easy to think of Cooper Pond as a new, standalone park that needed its own support facilities. However, at the same time, it was important to remember that Cooper Pond is north of and adjacent to the native prairie and wetlands area at Oakwoods Nature Preserve and that support facilities, such as parking lots and restroom facilities, already exist. Furthermore, it was helpful to envision Cooper Pond as a new and exciting hiking destination at Oakwoods Nature Preserve, and to imagine the possibilities and experiences that Cooper Pond could add to the plentiful opportunities already available at the park.

Encouraging park visitors to use the lower parking lot at Oakwoods Nature Preserve, access the Cooper Pond trailhead near Dold Lake and hike along a boardwalk through the wetlands area and native prairie, and enter Cooper Pond where scenic beauty awaits is a practical viewpoint. The idea of hiking to Cooper Pond is consistent with other opportunities at Oakwoods Nature Preserve. The blending of Cooper Pond's natural features with those of Oakwoods Nature Preserve, participating in outdoor recreation in the presence of flora and fauna, and enjoying the freedom felt when hiking are the experiences that Cooper Pond can provide.

COOPER POND MASTER PLAN
Section #1: Wildlife Friendly Fences, Boundary Markers, and Barriers to Vehicle Access

When the Hancock Park District took ownership of Cooper Pond on September 26, 2024, the property was enclosed by a six-foot-high chain link fence with three strands of barbed wire spaced four inches apart at the top. Barbed wire draws a nasty line. Clearly, the fence was installed to control access and limit liability. Thus, it was a complex barrier and not a wildlife friendly enclosure. From a wildlife point of view, the fence is too high to jump over with no space to crawl under, and the barbed wire may be difficult for animals to see. What, if any, negative impact the chain link fence and barbed wire had on wildlife is unknown. However, speculation abounds.

Cooper Pond is located north of and adjacent to Oakwoods Nature Preserve. It shares the boundary with native prairie and wetlands. There is a natural succession area across County Road 144 east of Cooper Pond, and there is open water, a remnant woodland, and agricultural areas to the north and west. Cooper Pond is surrounded by wildlife habitat, there is a wildlife presence in the area, and it is well known that wildlife must travel to find food, shelter, and water. Cooper Pond should be managed in part with those facts in mind.

Between September 2024 and January 2025, a deer trail was seen south of Cooper Pond and tracks were evident around the enclosure. A wild turkey was observed inside the enclosure. It frantically paced back and forth and finally flew over the fence toward Oakwoods Nature Preserve. A rabbit was seen inside the enclosure and a hawk was heard and seen near the remnant woodland northwest of the property. Waterfowl were present and a bald eagle was seen flying over the pond. Wildlife would benefit from barrier-free travel to and from Cooper Pond.

The best situation for wildlife is an open habitat with no fences. However, where a fence is needed, less fence is better. The ideal wildlife friendly fence would allow free passage for animals to jump over and crawl under, be highly visible for deer, birds, and other animals, and eliminate the chance of tangling and injury.

A wildlife friendly fence that is also meant to deter vehicle access should be substantial enough that a deliberate act of vandalism would be required to gain entry. From a management standpoint, vehicles gaining access to the property and driving around the pond and hiding, especially when the property is closed from sunset to sunrise, are concerning. Human behavior is predictable. Cooper Pond's proximity to County Road 144 and a driveway owned by American Electric Power located along the north side of Cooper Pond and behind the property create unique challenges and foreseeable issues that should be managed.

Action Plan #1:

1. Repair or replace the gate near County Road 144 so that it can open easily. Retain the existing posts.

2. Remove the fence but keep fence posts in the ground to serve as boundary markers, and potentially as fence posts and signposts. There are approximately 3,520 feet of chain link fence plus barbed wire to remove. Barbed wire is the priority given its unfriendly attitude toward wildlife and because the removal of chain link fence might happen in phases.

   In many areas, vegetation has encroached upon the fence, thus heightening the degree of difficulty and extending the timeline associated with fence removal. The timeline will be extended even more considering that the chain link fence must be removed and replaced with a new fence at the same time to deter vehicle access.

3. Install a wildlife friendly fence along the boundary on all four sides of Cooper Pond to deter vehicle access, including cars, trucks, motorcycles, dirt bikes, golf carts, all-terrain vehicles, and snowmobiles. A cable (or smooth wire) with a white PVC pipe is the first option. It would use existing fence posts and promote a more open habitat. The second option is a rustic and more robust post and rail fence. It would allow for the removal of all existing fence posts followed by the installation of wood fence posts at the same locations.

Fence Posts and Caps at Cooper Pond

4. If the cable fence with a PVC pipe is used, cut the fence posts so that fence posts with caps are 30 inches high (24 inches minimum, 30 inches maximum). Reuse the fence caps or install new caps (e.g., loop caps). The existing fence caps are 17 inches long, angled, with slots to hold barbed wire. Attach a cable to the fence posts and cover the cable with a white PVC pipe.

   A cable covered with a white PVC pipe 30 inches from the ground was selected so that wildlife can jump over and crawl under. The fence is also meant to be high enough to be seen and to deter a vehicle, but low enough to avoid serious injury if a vehicle, such as a snowmobile, ran into the cable covered by a white PVC pipe.

The subject of cable covered by white PVC pipes was subject to serious contemplation throughout the master planning process. Specifications include the fence being low-level (e.g., 30 inches above the ground), the cable not being exposed but rather covered with PVC pipe, and the cable being visible with the use of white PVC pipe, like the yellow and white PVC pipes used on cables attached to utility poles found along roads and streets. All safety precautions that can be taken would be taken.

The current fence posts are 10 feet apart. Therefore, installing the fence with 10-foot-long sections of cable and PVC pipe might help manage the slack, and it would be easier to repair or replace compared to a longer strand. Also, the land around Cooper Pond is bordered by American Electric Power property to the north and west (which is bordered by agricultural land), County Road 144 to the east (which runs parallel to Cooper Pond), and the Wetland Restoration Area (i.e. native prairie) to the south. The area around Cooper Pond is not conducive to vehicle traffic (except County Road 144), and if off-road vehicles are present, the fence should be easily seen on approach. Visibility is the key.

Cable covered with PVC pipes

24-inch fence height to a snowmobile

30-inch fence height to a snowmobile

It is recognized that when a snowmobile is driven, the seat will compress, thus lowering the driver a few inches. However, since snowmobiles are driven on snowpack, the snowmobile will be higher on the ground compared to the concrete floor in the photographs above, thus raising the driver a few inches.

In the diagram below, the top strand is wire covered with a white PVC pipe, the two strands in the middle are barbed wire, and the bottom strand is smooth wire. In theory animals can avoid the middle strands of barbed wire by safely going over or under the fence. At Cooper Pond, a cable with white PVC pipe would be the only strand installed 30 inches from the ground (instead of the 40 inches in the diagram) to provide safe passage for wildlife with no risk of tangling or injury. White is the most visible color for wildlife.

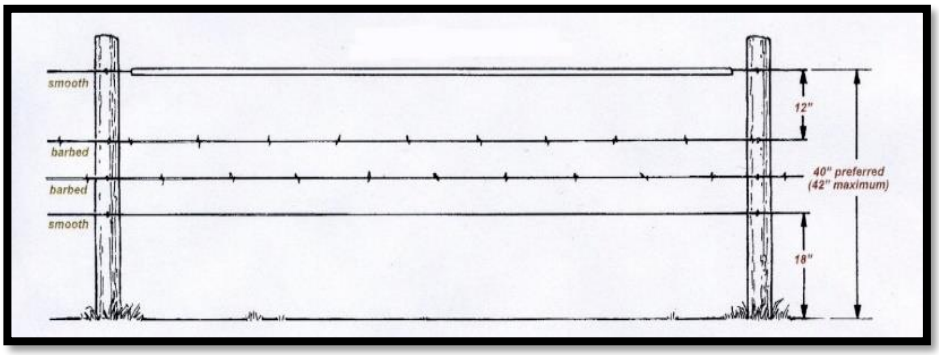
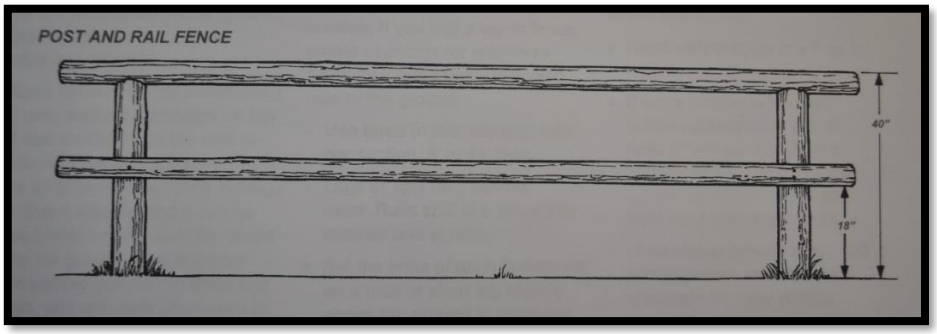


Illustration by E.R. Jenne Illustration, Missoula, Montana, 2008
A Landowner's Guide to Wildlife Friendly Fences: How to Build Fence with Wildlife in Mind
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Helena, Montana
Author Christine Paige, Ravenswork Ecology, Stevensville, Montana

5. If the existing fence caps are used, angle the fence cap toward the cable so that the cable can go through the hole at the top for stability, while rendering the point at the top of the fence cap less harmful if fallen upon. There are approximately 352 fence posts.

6. If the post and rail fence is used, the preferred fence specifications include:
   - Pressure-treated 6' to 8' round posts spaced 10' apart
   - Pressure-treated round poles for the top rail placed no more than 40" above the ground. Forty inches is known to be a favorable height for deer to jump over.
   - Pressure-treated poles for the lower rail placed with at least 18" of clearance. Eighteen inches is known to be a favorable height for fawns to go under.



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7. The photographs below show examples of the openings that will exist once the chain link fence has been removed. Since vegetation can change over time, and because vehicles can travel between trees and through limbs, a complete barrier around the entire property is recommended:

East side of Cooper Pond

North side of Cooper Pond

West side of Cooper Pond

South side of Cooper Pond

8. The creation of a living fence along the west side of Cooper Pond is an intriguing idea. The challenge is creating a narrow fence, since the corridor on the west side is only 20 feet wide. It is important that ample space be preserved for hiking without any risk of encroachment from mature vegetation. The absence of a designated hard surface trail creates the flexibility needed to plant trees and shrubs and still provide space for hikers.

   Evergreen trees and shrubs (e.g., arborvitaes) that grow in a narrow column shape would help hide the eyesore associated with the American Electric Power substation west of Cooper Pond. A living fence was created on the east side of Cooper Pond.

   By planting trees and shrubs together in a row with minimum spacing and with proper pruning, a dense, interwoven, green living fence can be developed. The addition of flowering and fruit-bearing species would support birds and pollinators. Even with a living fence, there would need to be strategically-placed openings for wildlife and a fence to deter vehicles from entering Cooper Pond from behind the property.

9. The photographs below show examples of a living fence already established on the east side of Cooper Pond albeit without flowering and fruit-bearing species:

Living Fence

COOPER POND MASTER PLAN
Section #2: Signs, Park Regulations, and Law Enforcement

There is a stark contrast in terms of how Cooper Pond was managed by the Cooper Fishing Club and what the Hancock Park District has in mind. As a privately held property, a complex fence barrier controlled general access, vehicle access was permitted, and signs were installed that said Private Property and No Trespassing. Upon inspection, there appeared to be one place on the north side of Cooper Pond where someone cut the fence to gain access.

As a supplement to the wildlife friendly fence and the focus on pedestrian access that the Hancock Park District envisions, signs and the messages they communicate are an important piece of the Hancock Park District's management plan. Since pedestrian access is encouraged when the park is open from sunrise to sunset, park visitors should be aware of park regulations. Therefore, the objectives are to install signs that communicate the proper message about park regulations (including the penalty for nonconformance) and give the Hanock County Sheriff's Office and the Findlay Police Department the support they need to enforce federal, state, and local laws.

Ultimately, signs should be aimed at keeping honest people honest, while rendering that common phrase from lawbreakers ineffective: "Oh, I didn't know. I didn't see the sign." The "play dumb" mentality will not suffice. Therefore, the burden is on the Hancock Park District to strategically place appropriate signs around the property boundary and monitor and maintain the signs to ensure a consistent public message.

Action Plan #2:

1. Install signs at strategic locations that communicate fishing regulations (e.g., catch and release). At minimum, signposts should be installed near the boardwalk on the south side of Cooper Pond. Fishing regulations should be developed as part of a management plan for recreational fishing.

2. Install the smaller version of the standard park entrance and identification sign where the boardwalk enters Cooper Pond on the south side. It would formalize the official entrance while identifying the property name and the Hancock Park District as the owner and land manager.

Sign design for Cooper Pond

3. Install No Parking signs on the gate and along the fence line north of the gate and on the east side and the north side of Cooper Pond. Consider using the existing six-foot-high fence posts as signposts for the official no parking signs (red letters and border on white background).

4. Install Open from Sunrise to Sunset signs at strategic locations along the fence line on the north side of Cooper Pond where the American Electric Power driveway is and along the fence line on the east side of Cooper Pond facing County Road 144 and along the fence line on the west side of Cooper Pond where the American Electric Power substation is and where the boardwalk enters Cooper Pond on the south side.

5. Install Cooper Pond Park Regulations signs on the south side of Cooper Pond where the boardwalk enters the property.

6. Install directional signs on existing signposts along the McKinley Trail at Dold Lake and along the Meadowlark Trail if applicable that raise awareness and direct hikers to Cooper Pond.

7. Install signposts and signs according to specifications outlined in the Hancock Park District's Park Maintenance Standards:
    - Maintain the standard green on beige color for park signs.
    - Maintain the standard 6-inch by 6-inch wood post.
    - Maintain the standard post installation of 60 inches from the ground to the top of the post.
    - Maintain the standard sign installation at two inches below the top of the post.
    - Other signs, such as traffic signs and specialty signs, may require their own unique specifications on a case-by-case basis. At Cooper Pond, this includes the signposts (e.g., the existing six-foot-high fence posts or channel posts).

8. Design the Cooper Pond Park Regulations sign so that it emphasizes the most important park regulations that if disregarded could have a negative impact on visitation:

COOPER POND
PARK REGULATIONS

OPEN FROM SUNRISE TO SUNSET

NO VEHICLES AND BICYCLES

NO VANDALISM

KEEP DOGS ON A LEASH

NO HUNTING

NO FISHING WITHOUT A LICENSE

NO SWIMMING OR BATHING

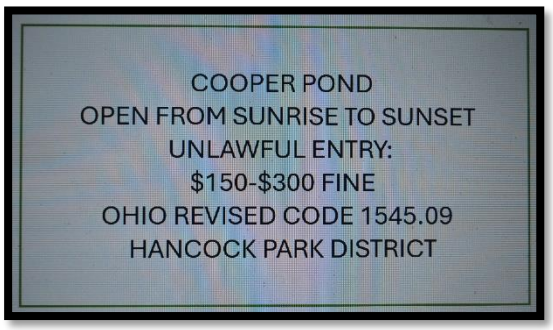
NO FIRES

NO ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

A complete list of park regulations is available at the Hancock Park District Administrative Offices, 1424 East Main Cross Street, Findlay, Ohio 45840 and at www.hancockparks.com.

All applicable federal, state, and local laws will be enforced.
Violators will be fined accordingly.
Ohio Revised Code 1545.09

9. Design the boundary signs to communicate the following messages:



COOPER POND MASTER PLAN
Section #3: Vehicle Parking, Trails, and Pedestrian Access

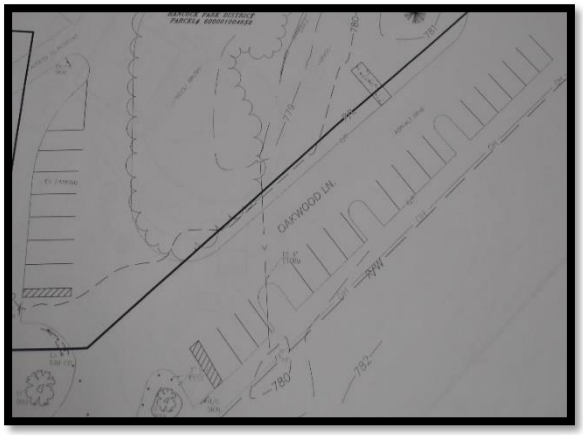
Parking lots are support facilities. They set the stage for how parks will operate. Accessibility per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) begins with the parking lot. Technically, nothing in a park can be accessible if accessible routes do not exist from the parking lot to the facilities.

For a parking lot to be accessible, it must be paved with asphalt or concrete or otherwise have an unchanging hard and smooth surface. The parking lot must have a certain number of accessible and van accessible parking spaces, striping, and signage to function properly.

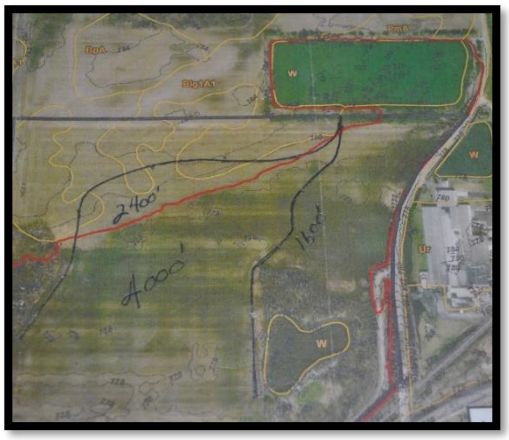
Access to Cooper Pond should involve the use of existing parking lots at Oakwoods Nature Preserve, especially the lower parking lot with 27 parking spaces. It already serves the Dold Lake area. An elevated boardwalk from Dold Lake to Cooper Pond would create a new hiking destination. The hiking distance would be approximately one-third of a mile (i.e., .30-mile). By comparison, the Mckinley Trail around Dold Lake is .37-mile; the Deer Haven Loop Trail is .75-mile; the Aurand Run Trail is .95-mile; and the Meadowlark Trail is 1.06 miles. Visitors to Oakwoods Nature Preserve are probably accustomed to hiking.

The boardwalk (i.e., the accessible route) would be easier to hike than most trails, since the trail would be level and constructed with composite material with rest areas and bench seating along the way. In addition to the boardwalk, a longer grass trail is envisioned. However, its use might be intermittent since it may be flooded or too wet at times. When the east field of the Wetland Restoration Area is dry, especially in the summer and fall, trail access would be provided.

Cooper Pond should be a hiking destination, first and foremost. Just because Cooper Pond is located along County Road 144 does not mean that a parking lot should be provided onsite or nearby, at least, not at all costs. In fact, there is no good option. However, since the absence of a parking lot at or near Cooper Pond and the need to hike to Cooper Pond to gain access may be concerning for some people, the development of a parking lot at Cooper Pond was considered.



Lower Parking Lot



Trail Locations

Preliminary planning for Cooper Pond considered the development of a parking lot at or near Cooper Pond. Brainstorming identified four options:

- Develop a parking lot on American Electric Power property north of Cooper Pond
- Develop a parking lot inside the gate at Cooper Pond
- Develop a parking lot in the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond along County Road 144
- Develop a parking lot at the southeast corner of Cooper Pond with an exit driveway in the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond

1. On February 18, 2025, American Electric Power (AEP) was asked if the Hancock Park District could use the AEP driveway when offloading and loading mowers, if AEP would install signs and a gate to keep people out of the area, and if a parking lot could be developed on AEP property north of Cooper Pond. AEP was willing to consider it.

   AEP would have to get confirmation regarding the Hancock Park District's use of the driveway when parking the truck and trailer with mowers, but the request was viewed as probable. The installation of a gate and signs aimed at keeping people out of the area and away from the substation and from entering Cooper Pond between sunset and sunrise was viewed as a win-win, since AEP and the Hancock Park District would benefit. However, during the conversation, the idea of signs aimed at keeping people out and the development of a parking lot that invited people in was an obvious conflict in ideology.

   AEP's Real Estate Department would have to be involved regarding the development of a parking lot. Speculation suggested that the Hancock Park District would have to present a site plan in the form of a proposal and that AEP would retain ownership. The idea of a gate on the AEP driveway beyond the parking lot was mentioned, which would address the issue regarding access by allowing public access to one area while preventing public access to another area.

   There is a lot to consider:

   - The driveway and parking lot would have to be paved with asphalt, and a concrete or asphalt walkway (i.e., an accessible route) would have to be constructed with a connection to Cooper Pond either on the north side or on the east side. However, the plan is to develop an accessible route from Dold Lake to the shelter at Cooper Pond with no additional paved walkways, although a paved walkway around the pond was considered.

     If a parking lot is developed on AEP property north of Cooper Pond, an accessible route in the form of a paved walkway from the parking lot to the shelter on the opposite side of the pond would have to be constructed, thus adding to the hardscape within the park. If that happens, then a paved walkway around the entire pond (approximately ½ mile) would make sense.

- Consultation with the Hancock County Sheriff's Office on February 13, 2025 confirmed that Cooper Pond as part of Oakwoods Nature Preserve would be patrolled according to the current agreement between the Hancock Park District and the Hancock County Sheriff's Office. In the absence of a parking lot, patrols would involve a drive-by while looking for cars that are illegally parked along County Road 144. A sheriff deputy would be able to park in front of the gate to maintain a presence and to enter the property. Further consultation is needed to determine how a parking lot owned by AEP and used by the Hancock Park District would be viewed in terms of the agreement, patrol, and law enforcement.
- Exiting the parking lot with a left-hand turn might be dangerous. The view of oncoming vehicles traveling northbound is limited because of trees and the curve in the road. Some vehicles travel at a relatively high rate of speed coming down from the overpass. To mitigate close calls and automobile accidents that result in property damage and personal injury, the development of a parking lot on AEP property north of Cooper Pond should require the removal of trees along the east side of Cooper Pond and the installation of a Right Turn Only sign. The larger the parking lot might mean more vehicles, which means more situations in which motorists are exiting onto County Road 144 with less than favorable conditions in terms of safety and convenience. If the Hancock Park District pursues a parking lot on AEP property north of Cooper Pond, it must understand and accept the situation being created.
- The development of a parking lot on AEP property north of Cooper Pond has advantages. It would allow for a larger parking lot compared to the other options, eliminate the need to destroy a section of the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond with the development of a parking lot and/or an exit driveway which have been suggested and considered, and eliminate the impact to Cooper Pond from development, except for the paved walkway to the shelter, which would be required per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

2. A small parking lot inside the gate at Cooper Pond was considered. It was determined that the parking lot would be too small, maneuverability would be limited, and exiting the park with a left-hand turn might be dangerous for reasons already mentioned.

Area inside the gate at Cooper Pond

American Electric Power property

3. The development of a parking lot in the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond was considered:

    - Developing a parking lot in the Wetland Restoration Area seems counterintuitive.
    - Exiting the parking lot with a left-hand turn and a right-hand turn might be dangerous. The view of oncoming vehicles traveling southbound is limited because of trees on the east side of Cooper Pond and the curve in the road, although the farther south the exit, the better the view, but with greater impact to the Wetland Restoration Area.
    - Development issues might include the ditch, differences in elevation, soil characteristics, the need for fill, restrictions, state approvals, and permits.
    - The development of a parking lot in the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond would conflict with the goals of keeping site development to a minimum and enhancing and preserving the scenic beauty of Cooper Pond.
    - The plan is to develop an accessible route from Dold Lake to the shelter at Cooper Pond with no additional paved walkways, although a paved walkway around the pond was considered. If a parking lot is developed in the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond, an accessible route in the form of a paved walkway from the parking lot to the shelter would have to be constructed, thus adding to the hardscape within the park.

Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond

Ditch along County Road 144

4. The development of a parking lot at the southeast corner of Cooper Pond was considered:

   - Developing a parking lot at Cooper Pond would require a one-way in, one-way out traffic pattern since the driveway corridor is only 25 feet wide. There would need to be enough space for a driveway and for park visitors to walk around the pond and to access the pond for fishing.
   - The parking lot would be small, perhaps up to 12 parking spaces with an exit driveway located in the Wetland Restoration Area south of Cooper Pond. Having a parking lot that is too small can create parking problems (e.g., parking illegally in areas not designated for that purpose). It might be better to have no parking lot than to create a new parking lot that is too small.
   - An asphalt parking lot would change the aesthetic nature of Cooper Pond, change the visitor experience with the presence of vehicles on the scenic south side of Cooper Pond, create a hidden parking lot (unless trees were removed from the east side of Cooper Pond to open the view), and create the possibility of overnight use made easier with vehicle access.
   - Exiting the park with a left-hand turn and a right-hand turn might be dangerous. The view of oncoming vehicles traveling southbound is limited because of trees on the east side of Cooper Pond and the curve in the road, although the farther south the exit, the better the view, but with greater impact to the Wetland Restoration Area.
   - Development issues might include the ditch, differences in elevation, soil characteristics, the need for fill, restrictions, state approvals, and permits.
   - The development of a parking lot at Cooper Pond would conflict with the goals of keeping site development to a minimum and enhancing and preserving the scenic beauty of Cooper Pond.
   - The plan is to develop an accessible route from Dold Lake to the shelter at Cooper Pond with no additional paved walkways, although a paved walkway around the pond was considered. If a parking lot is developed at Cooper Pond, an accessible route in the form of a paved walkway from the parking lot to the shelter would have to be constructed, thus adding to the hardscape within the park.

Corridor east of Cooper Pond leading to the southeast corner of the property

When the Oakwoods Nature Preserve upper parking lot was constructed in 2011, with its 17 parking spaces, it cost $62,715.00 for construction only (not including engineering costs). In 2020, the Big Oaks Activity Area parking lot, with its 88 spaces, was replaced, upgraded, and modernized. It cost $266,088.00, and while the scope and cost of that project is not comparable to a Cooper Pond parking lot, the services involved would certainly apply to Cooper Pond: surveying and drafting services, engineering services, permitting and approvals, geotechnical engineering services, construction, and construction materials testing and observation services.

So, it begs the question: How important is it to have a parking lot at or near Cooper Pond considering the availability of parking lots at Oakwoods Nature Preserve, the short hike from Dold Lake to Cooper Pond, the availability of Shank Lake and Dold Lake at Oakwoods Nature Preserve with parking lots nearby and easy access, the absence of facilities at Cooper Pond except for the shelter, the effect an onsite or nearby parking lot would have on the Cooper Pond environment, and the cost of parking lot design and development today compared to years ago?

From a land management standpoint, the Hancock Park District should mitigate late night access to Cooper Pond (which is made easier by Cooper Pond's proximity to County Road 144) and the foreseeable activities that could occur by refraining from the development of an onsite or nearby parking lot, relying on law enforcement along County Road 144 to address illegal parking and illegal entry, and hikers adopting a mindset that a visit to Cooper Pond should be treated as another backcountry experience. Food, beverages, chairs, fishing poles and tackle could still be carried to Cooper Pond. There are creative and ultralight ways to accomplish that with planning. If easier access is desired, Shank Lake and Dold Lake are available as alternative destinations.

Action Plan #3:

1. Hire contractors to design and develop an elevated boardwalk (i.e., an accessible route) from Dold Lake to the shelter on the scenic south side of Cooper Pond as part of the Dold Lake Development Project, which is identified in the Hancock Park District's 2023 Strategic and Comprehensive Plan: *"When Dold Lake was acquired in 2013, the use of the property for programs and outdoor recreation was envisioned. Currently, the property is used for programs, hiking, fishing, archery, canoeing, kayaking, photography, and birdwatching. Greater accessibility, new site amenities, and new facilities to support programs and general visitation are part of a preliminary development plan."*

   The Dold Lake Development Project, with the boardwalk as a component of the development project, would be eligible for a Clean Ohio grant, which would fund 75% of the design and development cost. The boardwalk should include gray composite material with an accessible surface that measures at least six feet wide and rest areas with benches.

2. If feasible, mow a trail from the Meadowlark Trail to Cooper Pond that can be used intermittently throughout the year when the Wetland Restoration Area is dry and passable. Raising the trail in wet areas with an elevated boardwalk might be an option.

COOPER POND MASTER PLAN
Section #4: Maintenance, Demolition, and Park Improvements

When the Hancock Park District acquired Cooper Pond, it also acquired grounds in need of cleanup, buildings in need of demolition, fence in need of transition, items in need of disposal, structures in need of repair, site amenities in need of replacement, vegetation in need of pruning, safety issues in need of attention, trails in need of construction, and park improvements in need of planning. As of September 26, 2024, Cooper Pond was a long way from being open for visitation. And while there is certainly an eagerness to open Cooper Pond, the Hancock Park District should not operate with a sense of urgency.

Action Plan #4:

Phase One

1. Mow and trim grass to keep the lawn maintained so that other work can proceed with a clear view of the grounds and with unencumbered access to work areas. After that, park visitors should be given the opportunity to walk around the pond without having to follow a defined or designated trail. Fill the ruts and level the ground following maintenance activities and restore the driveway around the pond to grass.

2. Cleanup the grounds by removing trash cans, steel posts, wood posts with crossbeam and hooks (east of the lake), barrels, lumber, picnic tables, benches, trees and limbs, wood piles, grills, etc. Declutter the property. If something has value to the operation of Cooper Pond, then it should be kept onsite. Items that have value to the Park Operations Department in general should be kept and relocated to a maintenance facility. Dispose of items that have no value.

3. Remove everything from inside the storage building. Keep what is useful, dispose of the rest. Provide an empty shell. Remove the wood enclosure that is attached to the west end of the storage building and remove the roof structure that is attached to the east end of the storage building. Repair the storage shed door so that it can close completely and lock. Transition the lock and key to the proprietary key system being used by the Hancock Park District if feasible rather than distributing an additional key.

   Install up to six canoe racks inside the storage building so that it can become a boathouse (relocate up to six aluminum canoes from the River Landings Maintenance Facility to Cooper Pond). Construct racks to hold canoe paddles and PFDs (i.e., personal floatation devices). Remove signs from the boathouse exterior and clean the exterior, especially the north side of the building.

4. Disconnect electricity to the small structure containing the mailbox near the gate, dispose of the material properly, and restore the area to grass. Ensure that the security lights near the gate and boathouse are operational.

5. Demolish the restroom facility and concrete pad, dispose of the material properly, fill the holes, and restore the area to grass.

6. Remove broadleaf trees that are growing up through the pine trees, especially on the north side of the pond. Remove invasive plants and dead and dying trees throughout the property.

7. Assess walls of vegetation near the pond and vegetation clusters growing under healthy trees. The vegetation blocks the view of the pond in places and may hinder healthy trees. Determine if the vegetation has wildlife value. Remove vegetation if necessary. Envision an area along the north side and west side of the pond where park visitors will be walking and fishing, assess the vegetation, and ensure that there is no encroachment.

Phase Two

8. Remove barbed wire from atop the chain link fence as soon as possible. Cutting the wire is not required. Wire can be removed, rolled and tied, bagged or boxed, and disposed of by loosening bolts and releasing wire on select fence posts.

9. Remove the chain link fence and install a wildlife friendly fence that will deter vehicle access. Options include a cable fence with white PVC pipes and a post and rail fence.

10. Repair or replace the gate near County Road 144. Retain the existing posts.

11. Repair or replace the three windmills so that they are operational for the purpose of pond aeration. It appears that that was the original purpose of the windmills before they fell into a state of disrepair. One windmill is lying on the ground. One windmill is erect with detached blades. And one windmill is erect and intact, but noisy and in need of repair. As a temporary fix, work was done to prevent the blades from turning.

12. Collect data about the fish population via shocking (i.e., electrofishing), develop a management plan for recreational fishing (consider catch and release), and develop a list of fishing regulations that can be posted at strategic locations.

Phase Three

13. Install a variety of signs at strategic locations and monitor and maintain the signs.

14. Assess the hardened shoreline while considering erosion control, aesthetics, wildlife, fishing, and canoeing. Transitioning the hardened shoreline to a nature-based, green, or soft shoreline (i.e., a living shoreline) is an intriguing idea. As a form of green infrastructure, it would involve plants and provide habitat for wildlife. Strategically placed openings for access to the pond for fishing and canoeing should be provided.

15. Demolish the current shelter and develop a new shelter at the same location. Enlarge the footprint from 20 feet by 20 feet to 25 feet by 40 feet. The open-air shelter should have steel posts and a metal roof. Colors should match the new shelter planned for Dold Lake. Use the following paint color specifications: blue/gray exterior with a dark gray or dark blue metal roof. Site amenities should include at least six gray or dark blue Octagon Wheelchair Accessible Picnic Tables SKU ATB1805 (Kirby Built) plus a black trash receptacle and a blue recycling bin to match the site amenities at Oakwoods Nature Preserve. Connect the shelter to the boardwalk.

16. Put a bike rack and a portable restroom facility with a three-sided enclosure near the gate.

17. Paint the boathouse and install a metal roof to match the new shelter.

18. Construct an elevated boardwalk from Dold Lake to Cooper Pond. Add the boardwalk to the Dold Lake Development Project outlined in the Hancock Park District's Strategic and Comprehensive Plan, move the project up on the timeline (i.e., make it the next highest priority), and submit a Clean Ohio grant application as soon as possible.

    In addition to the boardwalk, which would be eligible for a Clean Ohio grant (since the project is located on land purchased with a Clean Ohio grant), bank stabilization, erosion control, and related improvements, a walkway connecting the shelter to the boardwalk, the new picnic shelter, storage building/boathouse improvements (e.g., the metal roof), and perhaps the new gate could be components of the Dold Lake Development Project. Cooper Pond improvements would not be eligible for Clean Ohio grant funding, but combining improvements at Dold Lake and Cooper Pond into one development project would be efficient.

Storage Building

Restroom Facility

Shelter

Windmill

Shoreline

Gate

CONCLUSION

Cooper Pond, being adjacent to County Road 144 and Oakwoods Nature Preserve, created a resource management conundrum of sorts. Varied viewpoints existed about how to manage the new property, positions changed throughout the master planning process, and original ideas when Cooper Pond was first offered to the Hancock Park District were revisited, which ultimately led to the project goals and recommendations outlined in the Cooper Pond Master Plan.

Cooper Pond and Dold Lake are similar. They were both acquired after the initial acquisition of Oakwoods Nature Preserve. They were not part of the original site plan. Instead, they were absorbed resulting in similar challenges in terms of access and management. Dold Lake is hidden from the parking lot with pedestrian access only via a short .16-mile hike to the fishing pier. Security boulders and a steel bollard prevent access by automobiles, although more should be done to deter access by all vehicles like the measures proposed for Cooper Pond. A more fortified entrance to Dold Lake should be addressed with the Dold Lake Development Project.

There is still a lot of work to do at Cooper Pond. Strategy will certainly be involved. The timing of fence removal and replacement, sign installation, and boardwalk construction is critical since collectively they are meant to control access and behavior. Cooper Pond should not open until after the completion of the boardwalk unless a mowed trail can be provided as an interim step that would provide intermittent access when the Wetland Restoration Area is dry and passable. When Cooper Pond was acquired in September 2024, there was speculation that a mowed trail would be feasible and that perhaps Cooper Pond would be open in 2025. In fact, the trail route was tested during a dry period with a difficult walk through the waist-high prairie.

It is appealing to think about Cooper Pond being open to visitation after it becomes accessible with a boardwalk and when most of the work identified in Phase One, Phase Two, and Phase Three is finished. Regardless, until Cooper Pond is ready, Dold Lake and Shank Lake at Oakwoods Nature Preserve remain available for outdoor recreation, nature appreciation, and scenic beauty.

Dold Lake at Oakwoods Nature Preserve

Shank Lake at Oakwoods Nature Preserve