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INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR CONSERVATION OF NATURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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5 Granite St.
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14 March 1985

Shelby County Conservation Board
2599 Avery Ave.
Memphis, TN 38112

SUBJECT: SUGGESTED REVISION OF THE BARTLETT PARK MASTER PLAN

Gentlemen:

A decade has passed since Charles N. Sandifer and Associates prepared a feasibility study and master plan for Bartlett Park. In the meantime urban and suburban development of greater Memphis has greatly expanded, transforming formerly rural communities of Shelby County into crowded suburbs. Bartlett Park now stands as a small island of wilderness surrounded by a sea of subdivision houses. It is an important refuge and breeding ground for various indigenous plants and animals that have largely disappeared elsewhere, replaced by lawns and exotic ornamental plantings, by highways, strip development, and shopping malls.

What I said in a letter to the Conservation Board eight years ago is truer now than ever: Bartlett Park contains unique and irreplaceable relicts of indigenous climax woodland. Other parts of the park represent various successional stages from abandoned fields through cedar thickets and second-growth woodland. The stands of mature hardwoods have not been subjected to lumbering during at least the century since my grandparents bought the land; in fact there are some giant oaks, maples and sweet gums that easily date back more than two centuries. This woodland is thus of both historical and biological importance.

Compared to what Shelby County has already lost to development, this remaining wildwood is pitifully small. Yet the Sandifer Master Plan would leave only 160 of the 348 acres in Bartlett Park as a natural area. Some of the finest bottomland forest would be flooded to create an 18-23 acre lake. Other wooded areas would be cleared for playing fields, to make golf course fairways, etc. The original plan also called for a sports complex and vehicle maintenance garages to be added later; I hope I was correctly informed that these last proposals have been dropped.

Yet overall, the Master Plan takes a positive environmental approach that places highest value on the park's natural beauty and biological importance. Development of the kind mentioned above would really be inconsistent with the goals stated in the Master Plan, as the following quotes demonstrate:

"The key to the design of Bartlett Park is its development in sympathy with nature." (p 23)

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"The existing state of Bartlett Park proper is one of a semi-climactic forest, a condition that is rare in any sprawling urban area. In a setting {such} as this is, the opportunities of re-establishing everyman's ties with nature abound and cannot be ignored.

"The Master Plan Development should portray a delicate shaping of the natural environment to maintain the man-to-nature bond, while providing the necessary outlets for man's recreational needs.

"Use of the park should be such that man's presence will be an insignificant detractor from the splendor and beauty that nature displays." (p 18)

"Related directly to the existing vegetation on the park site is the dependent wildlife community. The trees, briars, and meadows provide excellent habitat for many species of birds and animals. To insure the retention of wildlife in the park, care must be taken to protect the food source and vegetative cover used by these animals." (p.8)

I endorse these goals and this approach wholeheartedly. To implement them it is only necessary to drop some of the more intrusive - and expensive - proposals, namely the lake, golf course, sports complex and maintenance compound, as well as paved walkways. Presumably the mandate to include all the amenities of an urban park left the park planners no choice but to eliminate much of the wildwoods. Yet if these developments are permitted, man's presence will indeed be a significant "detractor from the splendor and beauty that nature displays."

I hereby petition the Bartlett Conservation Commission to review the Bartlett Park Master Plan and to affirm that preservation of the native flora and fauna should be given the highest priority, in particular that all the areas of climax woodland will be kept undisturbed. Use of these areas for nature study, education, and appreciation should be encouraged. Playgrounds, picnic areas, and playing fields could be permitted in the relatively open areas of abandoned fields and scrub woodland, but construction of buildings, paved roads and parking areas should be kept to an absolute minimum.

It would be unrealistic, of course, to expect a formulated plan to be changed on the recommendation of just one person. Therefore local biologists and environmentalists should be asked to evaluate the importance of Bartlett Park as a wildlife and botanical sanctuary, and their guidance sought as to which areas are most vital to save. Members of the Sierra Club, Audobon Society, and Memphis Garden Club have all expressed interest in the park. But unless they and other Memphians are prepared to take an active interest in preserving the natural character of Bartlett Park, my own opinion as a non-resident will probably carry little weight.

I would like to point out, however, that a) I am a wildlife biologist with a PhD in zoology (currently a Research Associate of the Smithsonian Institution); b) I am actively involved in conservation as a member of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and as a member of the Peterborough Conservation Commission; and c) I have a special interest in the Bartlett Woods because the time I spent there as a child fostered the interest in nature that led me to become a zoologist.

Moreover, I advised my cousin, Katherine Nesbit, to sell her land to the Shelby County Conservation Board in the belief that Bartlett Woods would thereby be safeguarded. When I learned that it was going to be developed as a municipal park, I feared that I had misguided her. It is only fortunate, from our point of view, that lack of Federal funds has forced postponement. Imagine my dismay, then, when I found that a sewer line had been cut through the woods parallel to Harrington Creek. Hundreds of large trees were downed in a 60-100 foot swath through prime woodland, supposedly for a sewer line to a school on Old Brownsville Road. (But judging by the size of the sewer, I suspect it was intended to serve the planned subdivisions there and on St. Elmo Rd.) I noted during a visit last year that much of the debris had never been cleaned up and that the soil is eroding in various places along the cut line.

The fact that the Conservation Board allowed it to happen raises serious doubts as to whether it has the will or the authority to protect the park against pressures from other County agencies and developers. This irreparable damage to the Bartlett Woods is all the more dismaying because it was avoidable: if the sewer line had been laid a couple of hundred yards to the west it would have bypassed the woods.

I feel very strongly that conservationists in and out of government have to take the lead in safeguarding natural areas for the benefit of future generations. The destruction of the American wilderness has accelerated to such an extent during the last quarter-century that precious little remains in the eastern U. S. outside of national and state parks. Development in Shelby County appears to have been singularly intensive and unregulated. All of which adds to the significance of Bartlett Park as one of the few remaining wild areas. To let Bartlett Woods be diminished and violated for recreational purposes is not, I firmly believe, in the best longterm interests of the people. The Shelby County Conservation Board has been given stewardship of this land. Those who serve on it will be harshly judged in the future, and rightly so, if they allow it to be degraded.

Memphis is far better supplied with golf courses, tennis courts, and other recreational facilities than it is with greenbelts. If more facilities are needed, let them be put on

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some of the wasteland left by subdivision and highway construction, where they would be positive improvements.

Bartlett Park should be kept as a monument to the natural history of Shelby County, where present and future generations of Memphians can gain firsthand understanding of what was here at the beginning.

Thank you for your consideration,

Most Sincerely,



Richard D. Estes

cc/ Audobon Society
Sierra Club
Memphis Garden Club