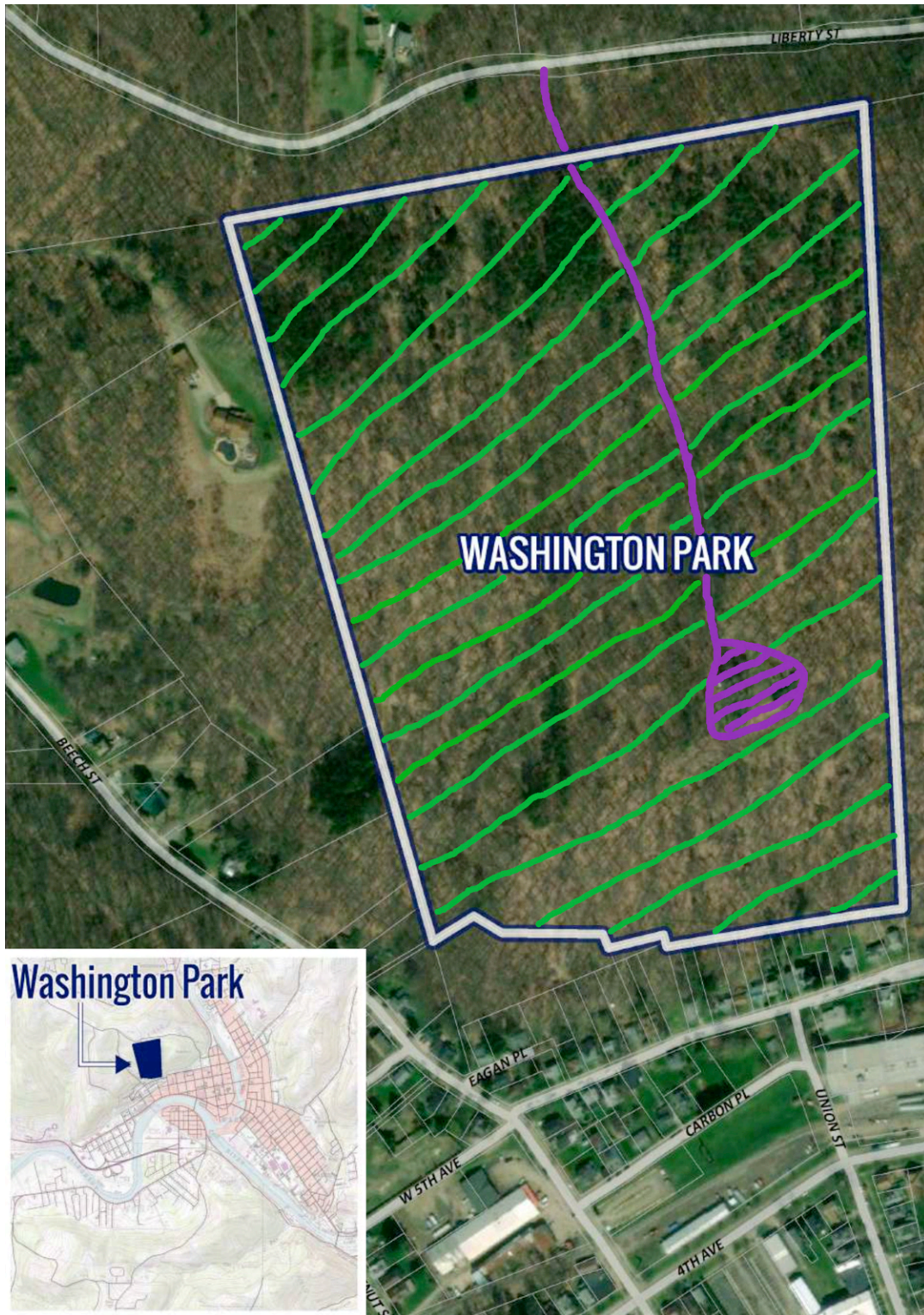


George Washington Park and Nature Preserve

"In 1922, a small group of public spirited men decided that the enjoyment of this hill should be preserved for all time." –The Story of George Washington Park, 1939

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." – Aldo Leopold



Green Hash Marks = Nature preserve – no developments, no timber harvest or timber management, any nature trails established here are to be strictly foot-traffic only. No motorized vehicles or bicycles are to be allowed.

Purple Hash Marks = This represents the entry driveway from Liberty Street, as well as the picnic and overlook area which would be maintained as it normally has been for generations.

George Washington Park and Nature Preserve

Sixty-Five Acres

Warren, Pennsylvania

On April 28, 1922, several forward thinking Warrenites got together and purchased the land that is now known as Washington Park, specifically so that it would be permanently protected from all forms of development for future generation to enjoy in its natural condition. They were: C.T. Conarro, William Muir, F.E. Hertzell, Ed Walker, E.D. Wetmore, H.A. Logan, George Craft, F.B. Jackson, M.W. Jamieson, E.W. Campbell, A.J. Hazeltine, W.C. Heasley, and M.W. Bartholomew.

Following up on this land acquisition, in 1932 — the 200th anniversary year of President George Washington's birth — the park was formally dedicated. In a 1939 report titled *The Story of George Washington Park* this history was recounted:

In 1922, a small group of public spirited men decided that the enjoyment of this hill should be preserved for all time. Through their generous contributions, a tract of 60 acres was purchased and presented to the Borough of Warren. Ten years later, at the time of the George Washington Bi-Centennial, a group of women in the older patriotic and historical societies arranged to dedicate the land as George Washington Park. Appropriate ceremonies were held on August 9, 1932, and a native stone boulder was placed, having on it bronze tablets in honor of the donors of the land and the organizations planning its increased use by the public. Two thousand white pine and Norway spruce trees were then planted, and since that time, a total of nearly 20,000 trees, mostly red pine, have been set out. The oldest of these are now beginning to mingle with the native ash, maple, and white and red oak in profusion, to create a beautiful town forest.

This current proposal asks that the entire 65 acres of Washington Park be formally and once and for all “preserved for all time” by the City of Warren, as it’s Founders intended, as a Nature Preserve.

What would a Washington Park and Nature Preserve entail? There should be no developments, no logging or any form of timber management within the park, and any nature trails established there would be for foot traffic only. No motorized or mechanized uses, or any wheeled contraptions or modes of transport, would be allowed within the Nature Preserve. Naturally, this would include no mountain biking. The parking, picnicking, and overlook area would of course be maintained just as they always have been for generations.

The concept of a nature preserve at Washington Park is not a new, untoward, or unusual idea. Locally there are small tracts of land permanently protected from all forms of development, purely for their ecological value, and for people to quietly enjoy nature on foot. These include the 96-acre Anders Run Natural Area in Irvine, and the 570-acre Jamestown, New York Audubon Nature Preserve. No motorized vehicles or bicycles are allowed on the nature trails at either of these locations.

And those are just two local examples. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of similar nature centers and nature preserves, etc. scattered throughout the East, and indeed all around the country, that have been established and facilitated by both public and private entities. Nature for nature’s sake.

In addition to preserving nature, the costs of a Washington Park and Nature Preserve to the City of Warren and Warren taxpayers would be low. Little to no different that the costs for maintaining Washington Park are now, which include mowing the grass in the picnic area, and periodically emptying the garbage cans. By contrast, bear in mind that more developments at Washington Park would automatically mean higher maintenance costs to City of Warren taxpayers going forward.

A helpful and apt analogue to look to for guidance on the establishment of a Washington Park and Nature Preserve would be the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources State Forest Natural Area system. There are 61 formally designated Natural Areas around the Commonwealth, the smallest of which is just ten acres in size (the Box Huckleberry Natural Area in Perry County), but most range from several dozen acres to several hundred acres in size. Such as with Warren County’s own Anders Run Natural Area.

The stewardship approach for Pennsylvania State Forest Natural Areas is as follows:

“Natural Areas are managed by allowing physical and biological processes to operate, with human intervention limited to hiking trails, canoeing, and that required for public health and safety. These areas are set aside to provide locations for scientific observation of natural systems, to protect examples of typical and unique plant and animal

communities, and to conserve outstanding examples of natural interest and beauty. Many of these areas support unique biologic, geologic, scenic and historic features. Other sites represent outstanding examples of Pennsylvania's major forest communities." —*Pennsylvania State Forest Natural Areas & Wild Areas*. Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, Bureau of Forestry. 2002.

So, in essence, in a Washington Park and Nature Reserve, the objective would be to let nature 'roll the dice,' and we would accept the results with interest and scientific curiosity. For all time to come.

For more background on Washington Park and the concept of a Washington Park and Nature Preserve, please see the attached *Warren Times Observer* newspaper article dated December 5th, 2020, and titled "Preserving Washington Park must be priority moving forward."

Submitted by: Kirk Johnson, nine-year member, City of Warren Parks and Recreation Commission, Tuesday, June 8th, 2021.



Preserving Washington Park must be priority moving forward

By KIRK JOHNSON

The conflict is more than a century old, dating back at least to California's famous Hetch-Hetchy dam controversy, and can be generally characterized as the John Muir preservationist vs. "conservation through use" Gifford Pinchot utilitarian dynamic for our natural areas. It is everywhere a perpetual, exhausting tug-of-war.

The preservation point of view is in reality correct at least ninety percent of the time, but more often than not utilitarianism tends to hold sway to some degree. This is part and parcel of human nature. Most of the Earth's livable surface is now impacted. Every once in a while, however, there comes a time for citizens to draw a line in the sand in the name of preservation for a particularly special natural area.

Such is the case with Washington Park, long one of Warren's official "Passive Use" city parks. Its 65 acres feature an upland forest with outstanding views up and down the National Wild & Scenic Allegheny River. From its elevation 400 feet above the Allegheny, the confluence with Conewango Creek, around which Warren has been built, is striking. It is one of the few places where the elevated plateau topography of our region is obvious.

According to the Roger Tory Peterson Institute, the forest type here is oak-hickory with large red and white oaks dominating. Interspersed Norway spruce and Scotch pine, planted decades ago by forward-thinking Warrenites, have now reached great heights. Blueberry, witch-hazel, and the occasional American chestnut (once an important part of the canopy across Allegheny Plateau forests), are found in the understory.

Having been a member of the City's Parks and Recreation Commission for nearly a decade, I have seen some truly crass and cringeworthy development ideas floated which would diminish — not enhance — the naturalness of Washington Park. These include things like a frisbee golf course, and a large zip line leading from the park down across the Allegheny River. Now we are hearing about an idea to crisscross the peaceful Washington Park forest

with mountain biking trails.

For many years I have wanted to prepare a detailed report outlining the concept of an enduring nature reserve at Washington Park, on par with an Audubon Nature Center, or Anders Run Natural Area, to cite two local examples, but have not had the time. So this brief essay will have to serve as an introduction instead.

There is no justification for suddenly renegeing on the formal Passive Use designation for Washington Park, and the idea of mountain biking on hiking trails on public lands anywhere is unsafe on its face. And now, a rapidly growing threat to public safety on hiking trails — particularly for our vulnerable young children and elderly hikers — has emerged. Stealth motorized mountain bikes, or "e-bikes," have exploded in popularity in recent years.

Aided by hidden electric motors, e-bikes can reach unnatural and unsafe speeds with relatively little effort. Alarmed, the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management have established that e-bikes are motorized vehicles (just like motorcycles, ATVs, and snowmobiles) and that they, therefore, cannot be used on non-motorized trails.

Forest Service law enforcement officials point out that they cannot differentiate e-bikes from regular mountain bikes. Since the use of e-bikes is growing exponentially, and a large percentage of mountain bikers are cavalier scofflaws, it follows that these dangerous machines will be regularly, surreptitiously used on trails that are intended to be non-motorized, such as what is being described for Washington Park.

I have initiated a Facebook page, "Protect and Preserve Washington Park," for those who would like to follow this issue. I had to finally get off the dime due to the urgent defensive nature of this latest mountain biking threat. However, the vision is larger. Any momentum gained through the successful defeat of the mountain biking idea should be paid forward into an extended campaign — likely to take years or even decades — for comprehensive permanent preservation measures at Washington Park.

A Washington Park Nature Preserve would establish that no timber cutting or management of any kind shall take place in the park — in perpetuity. The idea would be to simply let nature 'roll the dice' at Washington Park and accept the results with interest and scientific curiosity, as is the case at Anders Run.

Establishing formal hiking trails might be nice, but if we are making a list of priorities for the park, the acquisition of subsurface properties from willing sellers should take precedence. Along with funding to decommission and cap off existing oil wells, once the rights are acquired, in order to work toward naturalizing the entire area to the greatest degree possible. When one walks through the woods there as it is, the smell of the wells is noticeable. And they are of course unsightly. It would be nice to phase that activity out over a period of time.

Washington Park should always be a place for people to picnic, view the overlook, and maybe stroll through the forest on foot in peace and quiet. Let us permanently protect it from all forms of development ideas by the next 'snake oil salesman.' And the next, and the next, and the next. Remember that mountain biking would also be the proverbial camel's nose under the tent, paving the way for additional obtuse and inappropriate developments as the years go on.

Like-minded city residents, and even people from outside the city, should get involved. We could form an ad-hoc group, or perhaps even eventually a formal non-profit organization, "Citizens for the Preservation of Washington Park," to pursue this good-hearted, magnanimous vision for the permanent protection of this long-cherished public resource for all future generations of Warrenites and out-of-town visitors to enjoy in its natural condition.

Please contact me at preservewashingtonpark@gmail.com if you would like to get involved.

Kirk Johnson is a resident of the City of Warren, and an eight-year member of the Parks and Recreation Commission. He holds a masters degree in environmental studies.