

Wheaton Park District seeks to expand Cosley Zoo parking despite neighborhood opposition

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The Wheaton Park District is moving ahead with a plan to add more parking spaces at Cosley Zoo despite strong opposition from neighbors.

However, the city of Wheaton must sign off on the plan, which continues to evolve.

The park initially proposed to add 258 spaces on roughly 1.6 acres across the street from the zoo, 1356 N. Gary Ave., with an entrance at Prairie Avenue just south of Cosley.

But a plan released on Dec. 23 calls for a scaled-back expansion with additional future parking as needed.

"After incorporating constructive feedback from residents, the plan has evolved and now calls for a phased approach to the new parking area," said Mike Benard, Wheaton Park District executive director.

The first phase would provide 73 parking spaces, which officials say resolves existing parking limitations at the zoo. If park commissioners decide to pursue a second phase in the future, it would add another 77 spaces.

Officials say additional parking is needed because the 49-year-old zoo's 80-space lot often reaches capacity from April through October.

According to an update released in October, officials said the parking lot was at capacity an average of 137 days a year.

Roughly 40 additional parking spaces are available on Saturdays and Sundays at an adjacent park district administration building.

During a Nov. 29 park-board meeting, two residents delivered separate presentations on parking data collection and the environmental impact of the new parking lot. At that time, the park district called for 150 parking stalls across from the zoo.

Meanwhile, more than two dozen speakers spoke out against constructing the parking lot for various reasons, including the potential of flooding, wildlife displacement and safety issues of crossing Gary Avenue.

WHEATON PARK DISTRICT COSLEY ZOO PROPOSED PARKING LOT PLAN CONCEPTS

ORIGINAL CONCEPT
258 PARKING SPACES



July 11, 2023 | Neighbor Night Meeting

FIRST REVISED CONCEPT
150 PARKING SPACES



Nov. 29, 2023 | Park Board Meeting

CURRENT CONCEPT
PHASE 1 | 73 PARKING SPACES



Dec. 23, 2023

Original parking lot design proposed a total of 258 parking spaces. The first revised concept included a scaled back lot with 150 parking spaces and a significantly increased setback from adjacent residential properties. The current phased concept would provide 73 parking spaces which would resolve our current parking limitations. Phase 2 could add 77 additional spaces if a future Park Board decides to build upon or repurpose the existing lot.

COURTESY OF THE WHEATON PARK DISTRICT



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The Wheaton Park District seeks to construct a 150-space parking lot for Cosley Zoo, 1356 N. Gary Ave., across the street on the east side of Gary Avenue.

Some recommended putting the issue up for referendum.

"Cosley Zoo's best attributes are that it is family-friendly and handicapped-friendly. Moving the parking lot across a busy street is not family-friendly, is not handicapped-friendly. This change will hurt our zoo," resident Tim Younghan said.

A petition on Change.org opposing the initial plan drew 1,994 signatures.

Additional parking is part of a 2017 "Renew the Zoo" master plan that included \$49 million in potential new exhibits and facilities over a 20- to 30-year span.

Expanded parking is the only aspect of the master plan currently being considered, according to the park district.

"If no other Cosley projects are ever completed, the parking problem still needs to be addressed," Kelly said.

After residents opposed a

parking plan released in July, the park district trimmed its initial 258-space lot.

First estimated at around \$4 million, the cost will now be lower, Benard said. An updated cost is being evaluated, he said.

He said available funding sources include a \$2 million contribution from the Cosley Foundation, a \$500,000 Illinois Tourism Grant, and Cosley Zoo and park district reserves.

"The parking area project will not increase park district taxes," Benard said.

Independent of the parking plan and slated for 2024, a Gary Avenue Improvement Project will create a turn lane and add a traffic signal at the Prairie Avenue intersection. Should the city approve the accessory lot, a crosswalk will be created with fencing directing people to the crosswalk.

Shawn Benson, director of Land Development for Wight

Engineering, the park district's engineering firm, said with the lot's construction 92% of stormwater will be collected underneath its permeable pavers or in adjacent swales. Water eventually will be directed away from neighboring residences into nearby Winfield Creek at a rate to reduce downstream flooding.

The board voted 6-0 on Nov. 29 to file the zoning application with the city.

The park district intends to file the application in early to mid-January. The Wheaton Planning and Zoning Commission will hold a public hearing around February, the park district said.

At the Nov. 29 meeting, Kelly prefaced the Dec. 23 plan by suggesting approval for the entire lot, but construction in phases. The first would be for immediate need, he said, with the second phase built only if the existing west lot were repurposed.