



Belle Isle Conservancy Strategic Planning Scope of Work

Background

The Belle Isle Conservancy (BIC) was formed in 2012 when four existing nonprofits merged to create a new, stronger park conservancy to protect Belle Isle, Detroit's 985 acre island park, now and forever. In just two years, BIC has already demonstrated its capability with several significant accomplishments:

- Re-opened the Belle Isle Aquarium, closed since 2006. BIC operates it, pleasing hundreds of visitors every weekend and thousands for special events.
- Recognized as the key private sector partner working with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), which now operates the park, with a lease from the City of Detroit.
- Completed a historically accurate renovation of the clay tile roof of the Horse Stables building, a \$1 million project.
- Administers historic preservation repairs to the Nancy Brown Carillon and the Aquarium buildings, and provides funding to match grants from the State Office of Historic Preservation.
- Engages 4,500 volunteers annually for Stewardship projects in the Belle Isle forest, with additional volunteers working in the Belle Isle Aquarium.
- Organizes special events, such as the BLISS Saturdays, that attract visitors to Belle Isle and showcase its assets.
- Informs the public about Belle Isle through a website, social media, and printed newsletters.

The Belle Isle Conservancy currently has three major roles. First, **it is the primary advocate for Belle Isle**, ensuring that it is a public park open to all, with an appropriate mix of natural spaces and amenities that are well maintained and that its heritage as an Olmsted urban park is preserved. Second, **BIC raises funds for major capital projects**. Third, **BIC operates the Belle Isle Aquarium**, and could expand its role to operate other park amenities in the future.

This past year, the park has transferred management from the City of Detroit to the State of Michigan by an inter-agency agreement and the State Department of Natural Resources now is responsible for operating the Park. The Belle Isle Conservancy has been supportive of this transfer of management and has a continuing constructive relationship with the new state management. The BIC also has been active in fostering community relationships to encourage volunteers and support for Island activities. While relationships between the state, city, and BIC are positive, they are being defined on a "as we go" basis. There is a need for the BIC to develop, with the participation of the State DNR and the City of Detroit and community stakeholders, a clear understanding of our respective roles and responsibilities.

We also need a short list of priorities for Island improvements that we share. The list of possible capital projects is very long, and most projects require careful planning before implementation could begin. Following an initial period of operations run by volunteers, BIC hired its first full time leader in 2013, President Michele Hodges, and in 2014 has expanded the staff with positions for development, volunteer coordination and administrative support. The Board of Directors and this still new staff feel that it is now time to reassess and to develop a Strategic Plan to guide the development of the Belle Isle Conservancy as it begins to mature over the next 3-5 years.

Goals of the Strategic Plan

Extensive benchmarking of six other park conservancies was conducted in 2009 and a comprehensive park user survey was done in 2010 as part of the planning for the merger that created the Belle Isle Conservancy. Board members, volunteers, and staff already have a wealth of knowledge about the park and about the roles that park conservancies play. The Strategic Plan should build upon this knowledge and focus decision-making upon four key goals that will serve to focus BIC's work:

- 1) Define the relationship between BIC and the MDNR. Also, while it is not expected to require a significant effort, our role with City of Detroit should be included. Regarding the DNR and BIC,** Which entity is responsible for what kind of work, and/or for which areas of the park? What is the best way to seamlessly coordinate private and public funding to support improvements on Belle Isle? BIC is the private-sector partner working with the MDNR for capital improvements. The two organizations share a volunteer coordinator. BIC already administers some contracts on behalf of MDNR. There are many ways that BIC can support and extend MDNR's work. BIC is also the park's advocate representing the public in matters of policy and planning. BIC engages the community in important decisions and communicates accurate information to a wide range of stakeholders. Like a trusted friend, BIC must both work closely with MDNR and to provide an independent perspective to represent the public interest.
- 2) Recommend the role and related responsibilities for the BIC as it grows and remains engaged with the MDNR and City of Detroit.** This would include an organizational structure and annual budget for the next five years. Reporting relationships and any administrative processes needed to improve the functional relationship with MDNR and City should be described. Improvements needed in BIC's staff, systems and consulting expertise should be included.
- 3) Identify a short list of major capital projects as a focus for fundraising and project oversight.** The need for repairs is vast. Balancing current and future public use with historic preservation is an art. In many buildings and natural areas, programmatic planning is needed before renovations can be done, to identify the purpose of the improvements. BIC intends to select a mix of capital projects that are achievable and strategic – which build credibility, capability, and lay the groundwork for even more ambitious projects to come. These projects must be wisely chosen, both for fundraising success and to become models for the working relationship between the public and private sectors. What is the BIC role in project plan reviews, development and operations?
- 4) Set objectives for programming to help BIC make wise decisions when opportunities arise.** What kinds of events or programs help to build support? Which become a distraction from BIC's longer-term goals? Criteria are needed to evaluate the many opportunities, so that funds and

staff time can be directed strategically, while still allowing BIC to be responsive to the many entrepreneurs, volunteers and community groups who are eager to hold events or to start projects on Belle Isle.

Scope of Work

Consultants are asked to develop proposals for facilitating a strategic planning process for the Belle Isle Conservancy, to take place in early winter 2015. The following steps are suggested:

- 1) **Form a Board Strategic Planning Steering Committee**, comprised of the Chair, Vice Chair, President, and a few other BIC board members and staff. This group will work closely with the consultant and be the primary decision-makers to guide Strategic Planning.
- 2) **Consultant stakeholder interviews with all other board members, MDNR leaders, and city officials.** We do not believe that extensive public stakeholder interviews would be appropriate at this stage, although selected community representatives could be added to the stakeholder list. This Strategic Plan does not have to determine a comprehensive plan for Belle Isle Park improvements, it must focus on what the Belle Isle Conservancy must do to effectively serve its mission.
- 3) **Consultant will review the 2009 park conservancy benchmarking, while working** with the Steering Committee to determine if updates or consultation with those or other park conservancies are needed at this time to serve as models, particularly for the BIC/MDNR relationship.
- 4) **Consultant will also have the benefit of the outcomes of four parallel planning processes:** an evaluation of the Aquarium with recommendations for its future operation; an assessment of the Scott Fountain and what is needed to improve or restore it; the development of a Communications Plan; and continued discussions with MDNR on priorities for and coordination of facilities improvements.
- 5) **Consultant will write an “issues and opportunities” document to bring key findings to the Steering Committee.**
- 6) **Consultant will meet with the full Board of Directors to present and discuss the document.**
- 7) **Consultant will draft a strategic plan for 2015-2020,** with key recommendations for specific actions for the four goals identified above, and any others that may emerge in the preceding steps.
- 8) **After meeting with the full Board, Consultant will draft the Final Plan.** It should be designed to be shared with funders and other stakeholders, to clearly communicate BIC’s intentions and needs and the steps to address them.

Proposals are to be sent to the Belle Isle Conservancy office by December 23rd, 12 PM.

Proposals should include:

- Narrative addressing the Scope of Work outlined above, or a variation of the Scope that is recommended.
- Background information on the Consultant, with a list of prior clients for similar work. Resumes for persons who will be working on the project should be included, with a rough estimate of the percentage of time they will be dedicated to the project.
- Timeline for facilitating the Strategic Plan
- Budget for the Strategic Plan, including the Consultant's fee and any anticipated reimbursable expenses.
- List of deliverables: the Strategic Plan itself, and any other resources or documents that would be created during the process.