

Even Como Park needs a few good friends

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Officially, spring began March 20 on the vernal equinox, but the snow kept falling. Apparently, winter didn't get the memo. I'll celebrate spring when spring-like weather comes to stay sometime in April.

April is a fine month to get outside and rediscover your bike, your backyard, and your favorite park. I'm sure it's no surprise that my favorite park is Como Park, but my fondness is based on more than just its flora and fauna.

On March 23, I visited the Historic Streetcar Station Museum at 1224 Lexington Parkway. This beautiful fieldstone building was built in 1905 after electric streetcar tracks were laid to Como Park. While the station itself has been lovingly refurbished, the nearby 1904 Streetcar Line Foot Bridge, which served as the main entrance for park visitors until the 1920's, is left to decay. Throughout the park there are many such contrasting images between restoration and ruin.

Inside the Streetcar Station today there are interpretive signs that summarize the park's history and puts that history into a larger context. The signs reminded me that while many of Como Park's features, both natural and historic, have been saved, too many have been lost or are endangered.

I'm grateful to have Como Park, with its rich past and present, just steps from my front door. But, often with close proximity come feelings of great responsibility. No one feels that sense of responsibility more keenly than Como resident and volunteer, Rhonda DeBough-Insook.

Over the past winter, DeBough-Insook and over a dozen other Como neighborhood residents have been meeting on a monthly basis to discuss a variety of local community concerns. It became apparent to these residents that most of their concerns were connected directly to Como Park. And it wasn't long before the idea of the Como Park Alliance organization began to take hold. DeBough-Insook has been one of the main proponents of organizing these concerned residents around this idea.



While DeBough-Insook and her family have lived next to the park since 1994, she has only recently gotten involved with Como Park issues. She confessed that, "While I was doing my own thing I watched things change over at Como Park." DeBough-Insook said, "Some of these changes have not affected me, and some have affected me quite a bit, but as a neighbor who has assumed that things were taken care of, I didn't feel like I had a lot of room to question or complain . . . as stakeholders we have a responsibility to do more than assume someone else has it covered."

An additional personal motivation for DeBough-Insook was her desire to be a positive role model for her children. She believes the time she and her family spend volunteering at buckthorn busts, park clean-ups, and community meetings, “counts as family time for us and we get the added benefit of community building.”

Como Park Alliance is still a very informal organization, but the group has discussed the pro and cons of becoming a non-profit. At their March 15 meeting (at the Como Lakeside Pavilion Black Bear Café) the Como Park Alliance shared the results of their membership survey, which helped them determine the group’s main goals. By the end of that meeting, Alliance members had finalized their mission statement: *To preserve the park's rich history and natural environment to ensure the integrity of the park for the future through partnerships, proactive activities and education.*”

DeBough-Insook admitted that attracting and retaining membership while building an all-volunteer organization is a challenge – the members lead busy lives with a multitude of demands so their time is precious. Consequently, the group is meeting for only one hour a month. However, the 15-member Como Park Alliance group feels comfortable with their slow but steady progress.

Regarding the members’ motivations, DeBough-Insook said, “Nobody that has stepped up has put an agenda forth other than just general concern for the park . . . there is wisdom in the group as a whole. These people are respectful of that, and they want to be a part of making decisions that pertain to the park and our neighborhood.”

Nothing lasts forever without caring attention and Como Park’s vibrant history and green open-spaces are no exception. So while you rediscover your neighborhood park this April, take time to discover what you value most about this public space because even Como Park could use another good friend like you.

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Photo by Matt Schmitt

Cutline for Photo of Rhonda (if needed): Como resident, Rhonda DeBough-Insook, stands by the long-abandoned Como Park “Aquarium” Lily Pond and Bridge (built in 1895). The Como Park Alliance, the group that she is helping organize, advocate for preserving Como Park’s rich historic and environmental assets.