

Introduction

The stakeholders representing the Tourism, Recreation, and Entertainment interest group¹ recognize the importance of a Metropark as a catalyst towards the revitalization of Detroit and the success of the southeast Michigan area. While we recognize that each of the park proposals presents unique benefits, we contend that the West Riverfront proposal provides the most attractive option in achieving our shared goals.

Michigan State Fairgrounds

The Michigan State Fairgrounds site holds many attractive characteristics that make it a candidate for a Metropark. As the nation's first state fair, the grounds hold a psychological resonance with Michigan residents. In addition, as a site located at the intersection of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb counties, its location allows easy access to major urban and suburban bus routes, which circumvents many of the problems concerning political infeasibility. Finally, existing structures such as a bandshell and auditorium make conversion to a Metropark easier.

However, these advantages are outweighed by critical problems that make this site less than ideal:

- *Remoteness from Downtown Detroit:* regional visitors are more likely to travel to the higher profile downtown region and avoid the outlying area containing the fairgrounds even if a Metropark exists on the land.
- *Land-locked location:* All HCMA Metroparks are located either on rivers or lakes, which make marina activities possible. Waterfront recreation is not possible at a Michigan State Fairgrounds location.
- *Low community-buy in:* Since many residents in the surrounding community object to noisy fairground activities, they may be unlikely to support increased development at this site.

Historic Fort Wayne

The main advantages of the Fort Wayne site are the potential to improve Detroit's cultural image, increase tourists from across the U.S., and, through its three main historical attractions, provide more park jobs year-round. The riverfront location also provides residents and visitors with recreational opportunities such as boating and walking. Furthermore, the historical landmarks could potentially attract visitors from across the nation, increasing the likelihood of success. Finally, the educational aspect could create more employment opportunities for park employees, such as tour guides and program leaders who assist visiting school groups.

Like the Michigan State Fairgrounds, however, Historic Fort Wayne holds serious deficiencies that diminish its attractiveness as a potential site. The expense of restoration may not be outweighed by the benefits associated with the conversion. Of particular concern is the area surrounding the site, which consists mainly of unsightly industrial expanses and poor residential communities that make it unattractive to tourists. If the HCMA were to succeed in its efforts to adequately restore the historic buildings, the site would still lack sustainable recreational appeal due to its inability to create "park regulars."

¹ The Tourism, Recreation, and Entertainment interest group consists of the Hard Rock Café, Marriot Hotels, City Park Employees, and Travel Michigan.

Belle Isle

As the “jewel of Detroit” and a proven attraction, Belle Isle contains many benefits that make it an attractive option:

- *Large size:* Nearing 1000 acres, Belle Isle best fits the traditional size of the typical Metropark and can provide more maintenance and operational jobs than other proposed locations.
- *Existing use and structures:* As a site that already attracts recreational patrons and offers a diversity of activities including golfing, fishing, and boating, little investment to convert the site for recreational use would be needed.
- *Accessibility:* Although surrounded by water, the island can be easily accessed by car or bus and, through partnerships, could be accessed via hotel shuttles.

However, several overwhelming criticisms disqualify Belle Isle as the frontrunner for a Metropark in our group’s opinion. Of particular concern are the potential political implications of converting Belle Isle to a Metropark, a move that could potentially be met with conflict from groups that want neither to relinquish management of the property nor to see a fee charged for access to the site. In addition, its lack of visibility to in-bound vehicular tourist traffic decreases its viability as an option. Unclear as well is how the development of the island as a Metropark will impact surrounding areas; since access is primarily through motorized traffic, it is unclear that visitors will do anything besides simply drive past the surrounding community without spending tourist dollars. Finally, due to water contamination and the large number of shipping lanes in the area, large scale boating, swimming, and fishing will be unlikely, decreasing the site’s attractiveness.

Riverfront

In comparison to the other three proposals, the Riverside/East Riverfront site has the overwhelming advantage of real potential to improve the image of downtown Detroit. Due to its proximity to downtown through a greenway, it is directly visible to area tourists, possibly changing outsider perceptions of Detroit as a decaying and crime-ridden area. In addition, the proposal to increase the Riverfront’s accessibility would make it ideal as a recreation and entertainment venue serving both residents and visitors.

While the other sites are only able to generate local tourism benefiting a certain area, we believe the Riverfront proposal has the best benefit to the Southeast Michigan area as a whole. The Riverfront development will impact surrounding area, raising property values and re-taking riverfront property from industrial hold. In the long run, this will be an important step towards Detroit’s downtown revitalization, balancing the existing development gap between suburbs and the inner city and positively impacting all other economic and social aspects.

On the other hand, we do acknowledge that problems do exist, particularly the upfront costs of a Riverfront conversion and a possible inability to generate revenue through admission charges. As an estimated 90 percent of visitors to southeast Michigan arrive in their own cars, a parking fee may be one solution to this dilemma. In addition to generating visitor revenue, the residents of the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the park would be able to enter without paying the car entry fee and would have unfettered access to it.

Therefore, despite the financial and political challenges associated with the Riverfront development and rehabilitation, the long-term benefits and far-reaching positive externalities of this proposal allow it to emerge as a clear front-runner.

Conclusions

Each of the proposed sites has the potential to become a successful and significant Metropark. The eventual choice, however, must be capable of renewing the spirit of entrepreneurship, hospitality, and warmth that once belonged to the city of Detroit. In order to do this, we must foster and support a project that will create livable and attractive space for the casual traveler or the potential employee rather than modify or expand existing space.

Belle Isle draws 8 million visitors per year and it has proven itself as a viable attraction in its current state. To choose to repair it at this time at the sake of more viable options is a poor decision. The State Fairgrounds has also proven its worth and appears to only need a source of revenue to keep it operational for the other 50 weeks of the year. Fort Wayne is a great educational and historical resource. None of these sites, however, begin Detroit down the path of renewal, sustainable, and progressive growth. None show the world the potential for Detroit to grow to be a “cool city,” capable of supporting an educated and energetic workforce living in safe and modern neighborhoods.

A Riverside-based initiative would accomplish these goals. While such an initiative would consume land that could be used for commercial or industrial purposes, these types of ventures are exactly what Detroit needs LESS of on its waterfront. Numerous cities have designed or revitalized their waterfronts into both premier tourist attractions for travelers and community destinations for the local citizen.

While the cost of clean-up and construction could be large and the revenue generating potential less than the other potential sites, we do not believe these factors should be the main focal points of this project. This is, after all, a unique foray by the HCMA into a non-traditional area of Metropark development – the city of Detroit. As such, we believe that a non-traditional approach should be taken in choosing a site that embodies not only the spirit of the HCMA but also expresses the potential for Detroit to become a shining example to the rest of the world as a city where its citizens can once again live and prosper.