

Resolution Urging the City to Resume Ann Arbor's Deer Management Program

For 2 December 2021 Environmental Commission Meeting

Memorandum

The City of Ann Arbor operated an exemplary, innovative, effective, and data-driven deer management program for five years, from 2016-2020. Ann Arbor's herd limitation strategy used rifle culls by sharpshooters. Venison from the culls was distributed to local foodbanks. In addition, contractor White Buffalo successfully conducted a research study of doe sterilization via surgical ovary removal in three residential neighborhoods. The deer management program was halted when Council voted to discontinue funding for the program, deleting it from the FY 22 budget submitted by the City Administrator.

As UM Professor Christopher Dick told City Council last May, "Urban deer management is an ecological necessity, especially for a community that takes pride in its trees, natural areas, and politics of ecological sustainability." The need stems from the fact that where predators such as wolves and cougars have been eliminated and where hunting is not permitted, deer herd can increase exponentially, doubling in size every two years if food is available. As a deer population grows to overabundance, the browsing pressure of hungry deer suppresses forest regeneration. Among the nutritious foods that deer like to browse are, unfortunately, the tree seedlings that produce the next generation of trees.

Deer also selectively eat flower and leaf buds which are the most important organs for pollinators and plant regeneration. A single deer consumes roughly 1.5 tons of plant parts each year. When a deer population eats the native plants in the forest understory, the inedible and invasive and non-native plants get a greater advantage. This can lead to habitat changes that displace native birds, wildflowers, insects, and other organisms that are part of the woodland ecology. In Ann Arbor's public natural areas, this environmental degradation would undo years of work by the Natural Areas Preservation program. Environmental Commissioner Christopher Graham received information from leaders of the Natural Areas Program that indicated that since 1994 NAP received for its tax milage some 15 million dollars. It has spent those dollars to support its restoration work on our Park Natural Areas, and to coordinate volunteer efforts totally some 176,000 person hours to "provide for the regeneration of trees, remove invasive plants, and begin to restore the extraordinary richness of the herbaceous flora under them which was once here." These efforts have been, are and will be undone with an overabundant deer population.

In order to better understand how deer browsing is destroying the character of Ann Arbor's treasured natural areas and native forest fragments the City hired Dr. Jacqueline Courteau to evaluate deer impact on wildflowers and tree seedlings. The data is clear: Deer are inhibiting oak tree regeneration and suppressing wildflowers. The Environmental Commission sees this as a call to convey a warning to the City: The ecological damage that uncontrolled urban deer populations perpetrate is clear, and it is profound.

The Environmental Commission notes that after five years of deer management, instead of continuing its growth trajectory, the size of the deer herd was substantially reduced in the areas of the City where the work was undertaken. Judged by Dr. Jacqueline Courteau's studies of deer impact on flora and by deer-vehicle collisions, even after the five-year effort, the city still has too many deer.

The trends, though, were in the right direction. Deer damage to vegetation was being mitigated at some sites. Deer-vehicle crashes dropped from 90 in the last pre-cull year to 50. According to the City's reports the time was approaching when the Ann Arbor deer herd could be stabilized at an environmentally sustainable "maintenance

level” and at lower public expense. The Environmental Commission urges returning to this path as soon as possible. The costs of not doing so will be higher, in dollars and ecological damage.

The Environmental Commission also has concerns with stopping the data collection on deer. The City had been monitoring deer browsing pressure in the natural areas and conducting a periodic aerial survey that counted and located Ann Arbor’s deer, but these efforts were scrapped along with the rest of the deer management program. This will inevitably impair making informed decisions.

The Environmental Commission urges the City to accept once again its responsibility to limit the environmental harm and threats to human health and safety that flow from an unchecked growth in the number of deer. Controlling deer impact is not a one-time event or a limited-duration project. Deer management needs to be an ongoing service and should therefore be restored to the budget as a recurring expense.

Body

WHEREAS the Environmental Commission fears that without reinstatement of Ann Arbor’s deer management the public woodlands are fated to become severely degraded; that trilliums and many other native wildflowers will be replaced by invasives such as Japanese barberry, garlic mustard or Japanese stiltgrass; that deer ticks, largely dependent on a blood meal from a deer for reproduction, will proliferate, contributing to the spread of Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses in our city; and

WHEREAS the Environmental Commission is especially concerned that an inevitable resurgence of deer will harm the native flora and fauna that is being carefully restored in the parks through the Natural Areas Preservation program; and

WHEREAS the Environmental Commission feels that the City should consider the climate change and A2Zero implications of allowing deer to prevent regeneration of Ann Arbor’s carbon-retaining urban forests in the public natural areas and suggests that those deer-threatened trees and woodlands might be preserved for an investment of perhaps \$100,000 or \$150,000 a year for the deer management budget; and

RESOLVED that the Environmental Commission urges City Council to restore, as soon as possible, funding for annual lethal culls necessary to reduce, and eventually to stabilize, the size of the deer herd; and

RESOLVED that the Environmental Commission urges Council to restore funding for monitoring the ecological sustainability of the woodlands in the City’s natural areas; and

RESOLVED that the Environmental Commission urges Council to restore funding to conduct periodic deer counts in all wards that are used to track the number and location of the City’s deer; and

RESOLVED that the Environmental Commission urges Council to resume coordination with the University of Michigan on deer management and urges pursuit of additional cooperation with the surrounding townships and the County.