

How the Chicago Rockford International Airport Can Be The Hero and Save the Bell Bowl Prairie.

Oct. 7, 2021

On behalf of all concerned citizens for the protection of an ancient, unique and very special Rockford, and Illinois habitat, the Natural Land Institute (NLI) would like to offer a proposal to the airport for protecting an ancient gravel prairie with creative design solutions to their expansion plans. The following solutions are proposed to avoid the destruction of the Bell Bowl Prairie that is proposed at the Chicago Rockford International Airport.

As a start, opening a dialogue with representatives of the local environmental groups in the region would go a long way to reducing the mistrust that is accumulating.

Additionally, there are a number of creative site design and engineering approaches that could substantially reduce the required footprint of the project and thereby reduce the need to impact the prairie.

- All of the parking lots (and perhaps a portion of the roadways) could be designed with permeable paving. Stormwater detention for the entire site could potentially be accommodated by over-sizing the storage in the void spaces in the permeable paving sub-base. (As an aside, the design of the site for the new Food Shed Co-op in Woodstock will incorporate all site stormwater detention needs beneath permeable paving, thereby eliminating the need for a stand-alone detention basin.)
- Onsite landscape areas could be considered for rain gardens and bioswales, thereby providing an opportunity to infiltrate and filter polluted runoff before it is routed to detention storage underlying the permeable paving.
- Consideration should also be given to utilizing green roofs for proposed buildings to reduce stormwater runoff and associated detention basin capacity.
- Site design criteria could be evaluated to look for opportunities to reduce the size and dimensions of parking lots and roadways. In particular, it is known that roadway width criteria and parking lot sizing (e.g., the number of parking stalls and their dimensions) often are very conservative leading to over-sized facilities.
- These green infrastructure design approaches would then allow space for the building to be sited to avoid impacts to the prairie.

These types of green infrastructure and innovative site design approaches are broadly referenced in the Kishwaukee Corridor Green Infrastructure Plan that was developed for the multi-thousand acre landscape immediately east of the Rockford Airport. This plan also discusses the economic benefits and tradeoffs in implementing green infrastructure design approaches.

These green infrastructure policies and site design concepts were widely shared with local government officials from Rockford, Winnebago County and neighboring jurisdictions and the concepts are relevant to this project. The Executive Summary and the full plan are available [here](#).

We understand that there is significant federal investment in this expansion, and that this economic development and the jobs created will be an economic boon to the area. We also believe that the airport expansion doesn't have to occur at the expense of this ancient, and very special fragment of all that is left of the original Illinois. The old thinking of 'us' verses 'them', or the environment versus progress, has been replaced with the concept of 'both, and'. Conservationists recognize that they are no longer just protecting an individual species, or a habitat, but that we are, ultimately, saving us. We are not separate from nature, we are a part of nature and the benefits that nature provides us are valuable. The vast array of ecosystem services for prairie that includes carbon sequestration, rainfall and runoff infiltration, erosion control and nutrient reduction are valued at several thousand dollars per acre.

We are asking that our Governor, Senators and Representatives facilitate a conversation with the Airport Authority, Illinois Department of Transportation, and the engineering consultants, Crawford Murphy Tilley, and our engineering consultant to seriously look at the site design and incorporate green infrastructure practices to allow the prairie to become part of an established approach to protecting this special place. The Airport Authority could be the hero of this story. These practices are not new and are used widely across the country.

Lastly, let us consider and discuss ways that this prairie can be protected. NLI and its partners have managed this prairie for the Airport for several years, and we pledge to continue that partnership and activity.

The Mayor of the City of Rockford has signed a resolution on October 5th to support Rockford as a Bird City which is a state designation that recognizes municipalities for their work to protect bird habitat. The Transform Rockford plan is committed to make Rockford one of the top 25 communities by 2025, and the metrics have a significant environmental component, particularly in regard to health and air and water quality. Tragically, this project is currently participating in the 6th great extinction across the globe. This design approach could change all that to be an incredible win with good PR for the Airport, the City of Rockford and the state of Illinois. We encourage interested citizens to contact their local and state Senators and representatives and to sign the Action Alert located on the Save Bell Bowl Prairie Facebook page and the Natural Land Institute's website. www.naturalland.org

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