12/04/2023

DuPage Unitarian Universalist Church
GROUNDS
LONG RANGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

Background

The DuPage Unitarian Universalist Church (DUUC) hosts approximately two acres of grass, tall grass, flowers, shrubs, bushes and trees. We are fortunate to own a beautiful and natural landscape, but it keeps growing and must be maintained. Several sections became unruly, and under Covid, it got out of control.

With a mandate from the Board, a Task Force was formed in 2022 to assess the status of the grounds and give consideration on how best to maintain them. A final report was completed in December, 2022. Further, in order to seek feedback from the congregation on the appearance of the grounds, a survey was conducted in February of 2023.

This long term management strategy is not intended to reiterate these two documents, but to establish a plan that reflects them as well as include the perspective and experience from managing the grounds during the 2023 growing season.

Finally, it is noted that the church has frequently relied on volunteers to maintain the property since it was purchased, and volunteer participation has varied over the years. Recently, with an aging congregation and overall, fewer volunteers, it appears that while volunteers have been very helpful for one time spring or fall clean up events, few individuals volunteer for routine weekly, biweekly or monthly maintenance to keep up with the continuously growing vegetation during the spring and summer.

Determining a Course of Action

The 2022 Task force documented and assessed the overall use of the property and subdivided it into 22 separate sections, each with landscape, prairie or other unique characteristics. Two maintenance contractors with different expertise were selected to maintain the grounds because no contractors had qualifications in both landscape and prairie management. In addition to these sections, unique areas were identified that need special effort (e.g. the labyrinth with volunteer assistance).

The vast majority of respondents to the congregational survey asked that some type of action be taken to clean up and maintain the property. Further, almost half of the respondents specifically

said the front of the church needed the most attention, with some saying it appeared abandoned, overgrown and unruly. Other areas also needed work. These suggestions had a significant impact of how the church property should be managed.

Landscape Areas

Some areas had already been maintained by landscaping contractors with experience and equipment in mowing and trimming. The front parkway along the sidewalk, the gathering area beyond the back patio, and the wandering pathways through the back prairie are all places that were mowed and trimmed.

As a result of the congregational survey, the Task Force and the Facilities Committee sought to have a better balance between a maintained appearance and a natural appearance. Thus, several additional areas became maintenance areas.

Finally, for security and emergency evacuation purposes, it was decided to mow the corridor immediately adjacent to the fence on the east and south sides of the parking lot.

See Figure 1 for a map of landscape maintenance areas.

Prairie and Natural Areas

Building code for the 2013 expansion required a landscape plan. The plan included parkway trees, parking lot trees and perimeter bushes. Further, rainwater retention areas were required to compensate for the construction of the new structures.

Connecting to city water and sewer allowed for the removal of the septic field in the back of the church. About two-thirds of the previous grassy (septic field) area was therefore used to create a rainwater retention area in back of the church. In addition, a raingarden was implemented in front of the church that drains under the church to the retention area. These considerations helped determine the best and appropriate management strategy for the prairie areas.

Prairie plants in these two rainwater retention areas facilitate drainage. All plantings were of native species.

Prairie management is conducted with burns every 3-4 years. Further, summer stewardship will occur annually with woody, herbaceous and invasive weed control, as well as with further planting of desirable native and prairie plant species as deemed appropriate. It is noted that the prairie contractor could not burn (thus, not adequately maintain) sections of the property immediately adjacent to the physical structure of the church building and shed because of the danger of damaging the structures.

Winter maintenance of the prairie section in front of the church, outside the offices, will occur during fall clean up. This will involve cutting all plants and tall grasses to ground level (one hour to cut with a hand-held, gas brush cutter, and two hours for cleanup). Plants and grasses can be composted in the North Lot, or picked up as yard waste.

The natural area between the two trees in front of the Learning Center will be weeded in the summer as necessary. During fall clean up the tall grasses and plants can be cut and removed (half hour to cut with a hand held, gas brush cutter, and half hour is appropriate to clean up) .

Finally, to respond further to congregational comments, a decision can be made in the future whether to slightly reduce the prairie size in the front of the church, or to modify it with a small walking path.

Thus, the sections of the church property that have been identified as “prairie and natural areas” will be maintained as such. Efforts going forward will emphasize quality over quantity.

See Figure 2 for a map of prairie areas.

Specialty Areas

There are several unique areas that merit separate consideration. They fall under the landscaping category, but require special efforts that may necessitate some grass trimming, weeding, brush or minor tree trimming, and focused mowing.

Specifically, these include the:

1. Labyrinth
2. Flower bed along the windows by the patio
3. Memorial Garden
4. Raised bed on west side of learning center (front of church)
5. Raised bed on east side of learning center (back of church)
6. Front door area
7. North Lot
8. Scattering areas

At this time, it is intended that DUUC volunteers from the congregation will maintain these areas. If significant funds become available for maintenance of the church grounds, some of these areas can be improved/maintained by a contractor

The Labyrinth will be maintained by using a weed whacker during the growing season to trim emerging grasses. Sticks can be removed and the paths can be refreshed with wood chips as appropriate.

The Flower Bed will be maintained by volunteers to weed, water, and plant new flowers, if necessary.

The Memorial Garden will be designed, and then maintained as directed by the Memorial Garden Committee.

The Front Raised Bed on the west side of the church outside the Learning Center will be maintained by weeding, trimming, replanting and watering as necessary.

The Rear Raised Bed on the east side of the church, outside the Learning Center, will be maintained with a weed whacker. If time and volunteer efforts are available, weeding, trimming, replanting and watering can be done as necessary.

The Front Door Area to the left of the entrance will be maintained with native and prairie plants, and maintained as appropriate.

The North Lot is the section of land immediately adjacent to the church property to the north of the Sanctuary. It contains a combination of some native but mostly invasive plants and trees. A pathway was established with woodchips to a fire pit, and benches were set up for religious education purposes, or to use and relax for personal, quiet reflection and meditation. In addition, a small area in the south east corner will be reserved for scattering of ashes, consistent with the DUUC Memorial Garden and Ash Scattering Procedures.

In 2021 a contractor removed invasive trees, bushes and shrubs including buckthorn and honeysuckle from the North Lot, as well as some unsteady or dangerous trees that could pose a risk to anyone using the space. In 2022 buckthorn trunks were treated by volunteers to prevent their return. In order to deal with unwanted further growth in 2023 a contractor was asked for a clean up estimate. The estimate was more than available funds, so a group of volunteers cleaned brush and small trees, then mowed the area in the summer.

Because of anticipated limited resources, and because, at this time there is no further compelling need than described above, it is determined that any available resources should be devoted to improving or maintaining the other parts of church property. If funds are available, a contractor could “mow” the area, otherwise volunteers may be able to maintain it. Future plans to develop the North Lot can be made when the rest of the church property is cleaned up and maintained, when funds become available, or when there is another compelling need.

Ash Scattering areas are included, but necessitates minimal maintenance. The first is the prairie area in the back of the church, and the second is in the corner of the property northeast of the labyrinth in a wooded section.

See Figure 3 for a map of specialty areas.

Conclusion

With these considerations, the Facilities Committee will move forward to manage our beautiful and natural landscape. This will be accomplished using a combination of a landscaping contractor, an expert in prairie maintenance, and DUUC volunteers.

.