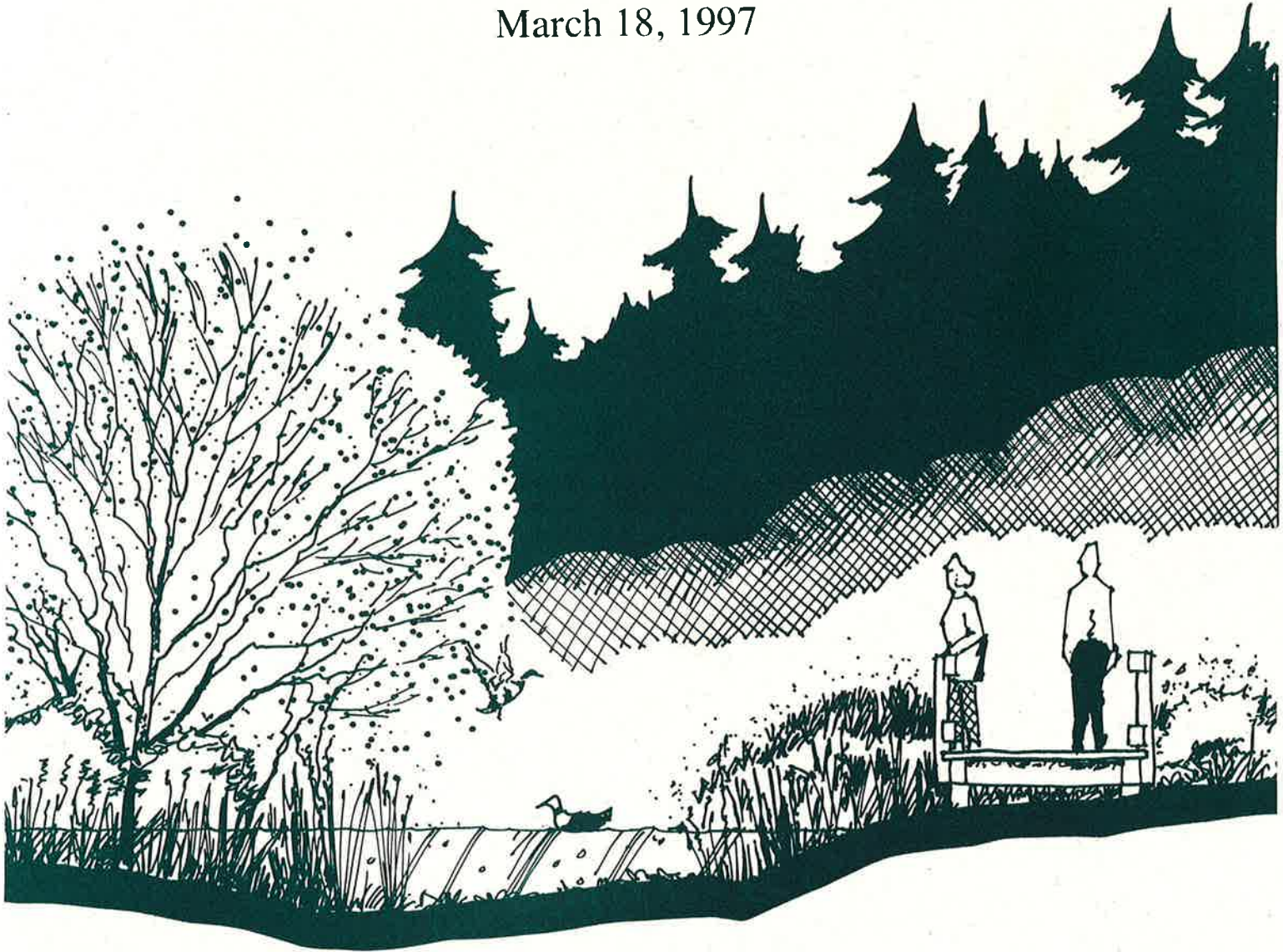


# Grass Lake Refuge

## Final Master Plan

March 18, 1997



City of Olympia Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services

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# I. Introduction

## A. The Vision

Grass Lake Refuge is a sanctuary for wildlife and people. It is approximately 165 acres of urban wetlands, woodlands and meadows. Animals can get away from people, traffic and noise. Visitors can close their eyes and listen to frogs and birds singing versus people talking. It is common to see a great blue heron land, a deer move along the forest edge and a newt or salamander silently walk across fallen leaves.

Grass Lake Refuge does not have spectacular mountain views, rushing rivers or pounding surf. The beauty is in the landscape diversity. Few urban wetlands have an equal diversity of plants and animals. Biological diversity and ecological complexities are what make the refuge extraordinary. The notable wetland complex varies in visual and biological character and includes open water, shallow water areas with the picturesque sedges and rushes that give the refuge its name, shrub covered wetlands and forested wetlands.

Surrounding upland forests filter stormwater and provide wildlife shelter. Much of the evergreen forest appears to be fairly young, perhaps 25-50 years old. The average tree heights range from 20-70 feet. Deciduous trees also vary in ages, dimensions and character. A cottonwood swamp has very large, old trees. The refuge has oaks and aspens which are not common in this geographic area. The seasons add more visual and species variety as birds migrate through the refuge and colors change. More than 200 plant species and ninety-eight bird species have been identified within the refuge.

Public access through the new refuge has been limited because of dense vegetation, extensive wetlands and lack of public knowledge about the area. Visitors today use the numerous primitive paths and roads and a primitive one lane sewer line access road which intersects Mud Bay Road. These are muddy much of the year and were not located to view specific features or to protect sensitive species. The December 26, 1996 ice storm broke up trees that now block many of the existing paths.

The Friends of Grass Lake were the first to visualize what Grass Lake could become. Their dream is now shared by others. Grass Lake Refuge will be managed to remain a sanctuary for wildlife and people. The city will manage the land to restore native vegetation to disturbed sites and to allow natural succession and growth to occur. Stormwater flows will be managed and monitored to protect refuge resources. As the westside of Olympia develops, Grass Lake Refuge will likely become the only large wildlife area. Consistent with public recommendations and state urban wildlife habitat guidelines, development will be limited to improved trails, boardwalks and environmental education and interpretation facilities. The interpretation facilities include an environmental learning shelter, five environmental learning stations

including two over water piers, two viewing blinds, and self-guided interpretive exhibits. A toilet and parking area will also be constructed. Two areas of the refuge will not have trails or other facilities and people will be encouraged to stay out of these areas so that they serve as wildlife reserves. Trails and boardwalks will lead to the diverse habitats. Trailheads will provide access from nearby schools and for the general public. Additional environmental education will take place in the refuge due to the improved facilities and convenient location to schools. Use of the refuge will be managed and monitored to protect wildlife. Because of the strong public interest in the refuge, many of the facilities will be built, interpreted and maintained by partnerships and volunteers.

## **B. General Location and Description (See Map 1 on Page I - 3)**

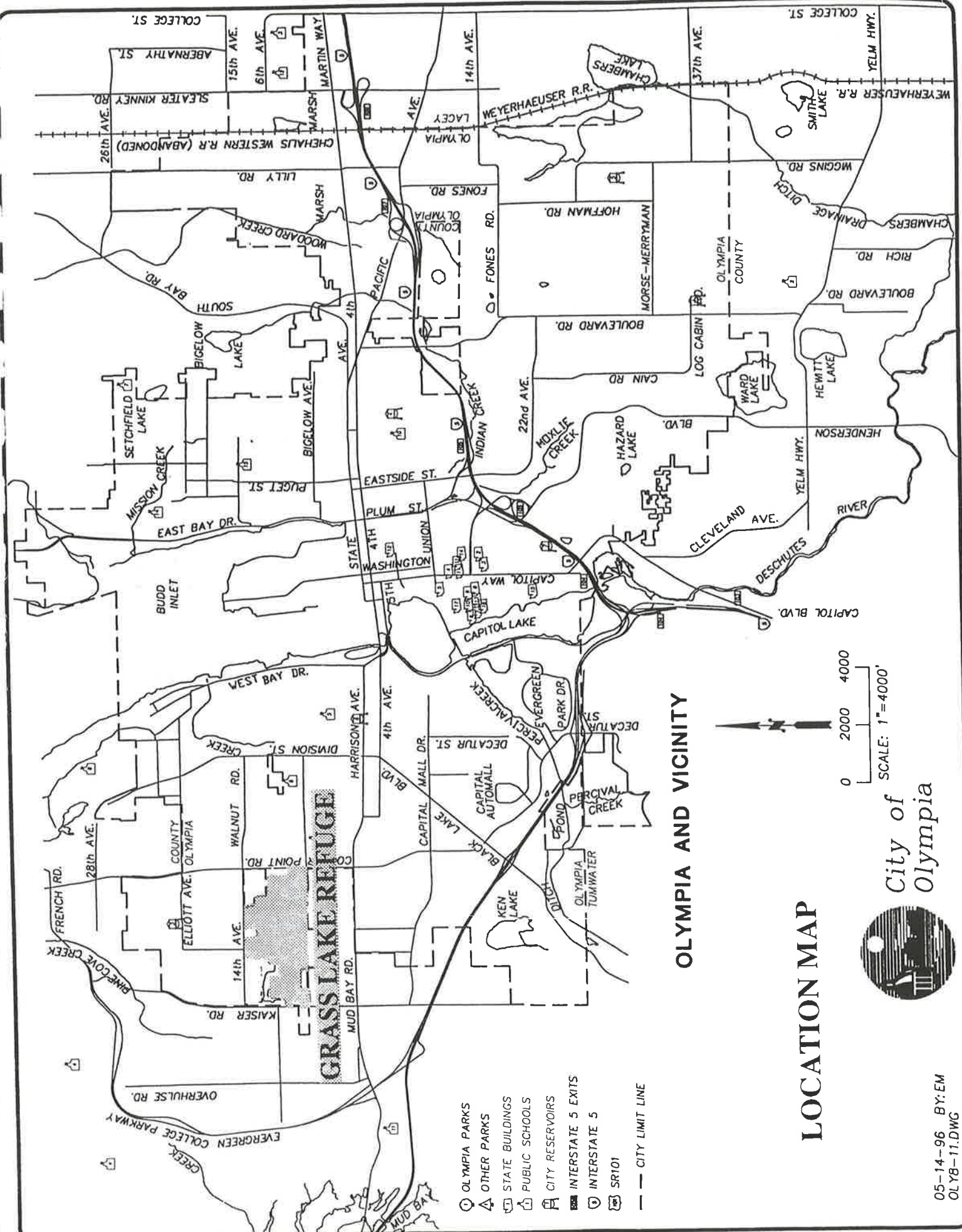
The Location Map indicates the refuge's location. The approximately 165 acre refuge is located on Olympia's westside. Wetlands comprise about one-third of the refuge and the headwaters of Green Cove Creek. The majority of the refuge is upland forest of mixed age and character. Refer to Appendix A for the Legal Descriptions.

## **C. Refuge Acquisition**

Grass Lake Refuge was acquired by the city in 1989. The city council displayed foresight in acquiring this diverse wetland. As the westside continues to urbanize, Grass Lake Refuge becomes an even more important natural area for wildlife and people.

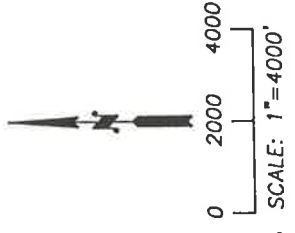
A key to the acquisition was the strong public support from a citizen's advocacy group, The Friends of Grass Lake. The refuge was purchased by the City of Olympia for \$1.8 million. The matching grant from the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC) specifies that, "Development of facilities will be limited to items such as fencing, interpretive/ observation trails, interpretive signs/kiosks, restrooms, parking, and creation or enhancement of habitat."

Because of the refuge's intended uses for habitat protection and environmental education, the major challenge of the master plan is how to balance protection and utilization.



- OLYMPIA PARKS
- OTHER PARKS
- STATE BUILDINGS
- PUBLIC SCHOOLS
- CITY RESERVOIRS
- INTERSTATE 5 EXITS
- INTERSTATE 5
- SR101
- CITY LIMIT LINE

### OLYMPIA AND VICINITY



## LOCATION MAP



City of  
Olympia

## **D. Refuge Function and Values**

It is impossible to list all functions and values of the refuge. Every spring chorus of Pacific treefrogs, every heron that lands in front of a visitor, the blood red of the coral root orchid, the mysterious shadows of three hundred year old black cottonwoods, graceful sedges and ice crystal filagree along marsh edges, the permanent smile on a bright orange newt - the art and poetics of Grass Lake are endless.

### **Refuge Functions and Values**

The refuge's twenty upland habitats and eight wetlands habitats create a high level of biodiversity. Grass Lake's biodiversity increases its wildlife habitat and other ecological and educational values to the community.

Grass Lake Refuge is valuable for environmental education due to its proximity to Hanson Elementary School, Marshall Middle School, Capital High School and The Evergreen State College. Classes currently use the refuge and more use is likely after the master plan is implemented.

People need quiet places, places removed from home and office to unravel daily stresses. As Olympia continues to develop, there will be fewer wild places in the city for wildlife and for people. The value of Grass Lake as a refuge for wildlife and people will become even greater in the future.

Grass Lake Refuge is a unique and important component of the city park system that provides visual and educational variety for the community and helps to protect the region's diverse and important plant and wildlife habitats.

The refuge is a very popular place for birds and birdwatching. The diversity of habitats and relatively large size of the refuge result in a wide range of bird species. The refuge has a very high concentration of migratory and neotropical birds. The refuge is used for breeding, nesting and resting. Numerous species are dependent on aquatic insects and undisturbed wetlands for nesting.

The wetlands act as a sponge, clean dirty stormwater and provide stable flows to Green Cove Creek to help maintain salmon and other fish. Protection of the Grass Lake wetlands is a headwater to successful fisheries management in Green Cove Creek.

The Grass Lake wetlands are believed to be among the least disturbed wetlands in the county. They are important remnants of a once vast wetlands complex. Since less than half of the wetlands in the basin remain, Grass Lakes has value as part of our natural heritage.

Grass Lake can be a place where the adequacy of the city's critical ordinances and drainage standards are evaluated. Proposed is a monitoring program that will document changes in water flows and in plant and wildlife species. Feedback from this monitoring program should be used to help document needed changes in ordinances and also provide recommendations on how to protect and manage the city's other new open space acquisitions.

## **E. Master Plan Purpose, Audience and Objectives**

Grass Lake Refuge has been sitting primarily idle since its acquisition in 1990. By developing a master plan, the community has developed goals for the refuge's development and management. The refuge has been studied so that its functions and values are better understood. Actions needed to protect the refuge have been identified.

The master plan is the map to the future - the hidden treasure map to the vision. It becomes a guidebook to seek future funding, build partnerships and solicit volunteer support.

A primary audience for the master plan are decision makers, city staff and park staff. They are the ones charged with implementing the master plan. More broadly speaking, the audience for the master plan is the public - users, volunteers and supporters. The master plan is similar to a contract between city government and the citizens.

The plan defines how the refuge is to be developed and managed. Through the public participation process, the public has defined their preferences and priorities. The plan documents how the city has interpreted these recommendations.

### **Primary Master Plan Objectives**

- Create a usable tool for long-term development and management.
- Provide clear direction and priorities for refuge management and development.
- Include wide participation in developing recommendations so there is strong agreement and support by the community, the department and other experts in the field.
- Document the refuge's natural and cultural resources so that this information can be used to make development and management decisions and track changes over time.
- Serve as a reference to answer questions about the refuge.

- Estimate costs for development and management.
- Establish a program to monitor the refuge to see if development and management objectives are being met.
- Recommend how to implement or accomplish the plan.
- Perform as a quality plan and marketing tool to solicit grants and other funding.
- Identify volunteer and other implementation projects.

## **F. Master Plan Process**

1. Identify Issues and Needs
2. Internal/External Issues Scoping
3. Consolidate and Organize Resource Information
4. Complete Resource Analyses
5. Propose and Review Development and Management Alternatives
6. Establish Implementation Requirements and Strategies

Three advisory groups helped on the plan. They were:

- The Technical Advisory Committee was composed of biologists, wetland experts and others who helped evaluate the park's ecological resources and made recommendations on how to protect them.
- The Environmental Education and Interpretation Focus Group was composed of K-12 teachers, professors and environmental educators from other agencies and organizations who are currently leading environmental education activities in Grass Lake Refuge or are interested in doing so in the future. They made recommendations on environmental education and interpretation facilities, signs and programs.
- The Park and Recreation Advisory Committee advises the department and city on parks and recreation matters. Their roles include assisting at the master plan workshops, reviewing the draft master plan and making recommendations to the city council on its adoption.

Public participation was a key component of the master plan process. Via two workshops, formal correspondence and informal communications, the public helped to identify the preferred uses for the refuge. The workshop workbook and the summary of public recommendations are in Appendices B and C.

The draft plan was completed on February 5, 1997. Copies were made available for public review. A hearing was held before the City Council on March 4, 1997. Revisions were made. The final master plan was approved by the City Council on March 18, 1997.

**Photo - Community members participate in the master planning workshop.**

