

# **Parks and Lakes Make Prior Lake Prosper**

By Councilor Ken Hedberg

Prior Lake's origins as a modern town were anchored in its resorts and recreation. Indeed Prior Lake's historical notoriety can be traced to the Grainwood Hotel, the original Hollywood Inn, Captain Jack's, the Rau Resort and many more. This heritage stretches back to the late 1800s and continues today.

We are a community blessed with some of the most beautiful natural topography in the metropolitan area. Our lakes, bluffs, wetlands and hills boast many varieties of native flora and fauna. Many residents tell me the beautiful countryside, parks and lakes are among the most important reasons they chose to settle and stay here.

Over the past decade more than 500 people have participated in writing the city's 2030 Vision and Strategic Plan, and through five planning sessions the citizens have acknowledged and celebrated Prior Lake's identity as a recreation-based community. The 2030 Vision and Strategic Plan highlights that Prior Lake is a people place for a lifetime with a threefold recreation system composed of our glorious lakes, active use play fields and natural areas with open spaces and trails.

Most folks don't know we have 14 lakes in our city. Can you name even half of them? Upper and Lower Prior, Spring, Haas, Crystal, Rice, Mystic, Blind, Markley, Campbell, Howard, Pike, Arctic, and Jeffers Pond. Whew.

Over the past several years, most of our residential development has taken place around various lakes and wetlands, with trails and parks coordinated to take the best possible advantage of these gems. "Living on the lake" doesn't just mean Prior Lake or Spring Lake anymore.

There are many recent examples of lake-oriented park improvements that we can all be proud of, including but not limited to the following:

1. Fulfilling a commitment in our orderly annexation agreement with Spring Lake Township, the city recently assumed ownership of 800 feet of shoreline on the south side of Spring Lake, and moved a shelter there, turning it into our latest park – the Raymond Avenue Park on Spring Lake.

2. The Parks Advisory Committee set a 2010 objective to work with the city parks department to establish better accessibility to our Pike Lake Nature Park with signs and perhaps a small gravel parking area.

3. Last winter city parks staff organized a planned fish kill in Little Prior to eliminate a poor fish population mix, leading to a restocking this spring. The new stock will improve the fishing in Little Prior – the key objective of the DNR-sponsored FiN (Fishing in the Neighborhood) program.

4. This spring staff refurbished the landscaping and rebuilt the access to Watzl's Point Beach concession stand and changing rooms.

Many families think of our play fields as the most valuable part of our parks system, especially the Ponds Complex and Thomas Ryan playfields. Just two years ago, financial contributions from the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community and Prior Lake Athletics for

Youth enabled the city to erect field lighting at the Ryan fields. These parks give Prior Lake some of the highest quality and most popular play fields in the entire south metro.

Last fall, in order to deal with tight budgets, the city embarked on an experiment with many of the youth organizations to share responsibility for play field maintenance. We're going to monitor this program very carefully to ensure our fields remain high quality, useful and well-maintained.

Yet, with all this, perhaps the most striking recent park development involved our natural open areas. The City Council approved improvements to the Jeffers Pond Nature Park funded through contributions from the Jeffers Foundation. The improvements include a bridge across the outlet creek near Jeffers Pond School, a shelter at the trailhead, paved paths linking to the bridge, a kiosk describing the environment there that also memorializes the vision and generosity of Bob Jeffers, and a chip trail around the west side of Upper Jeffers Pond. This trail will take hikers and Jeffers Pond students deep into the wilderness, far away from our suburban developments. It's really an amazingly beautiful and tranquil setting – right in the middle of our city.

Our Comprehensive Plan, which is a blueprint for what the city will become, highlights our mini parks, neighborhood parks, community parks and natural parks. The plan talks of service areas, the primary customers and where future parks may be located.

Park development is driven by park dedication fees. The city may designate land in new subdivisions or collect money to purchase trails, playground equipment and more. Your city council recognizes that our 1,000 acres of parks represent a major financial commitment requiring us to adequately plan on your behalf. Over the past several years, the council sponsored efforts to establish both a Master Parks Plan and a park replacement fund. The replacement fund is based on a comprehensive inventory of all parks improvements, estimating when they may wear out, and then setting aside funds to sustain our needs.

But the socio-economic characteristics of Prior Lake continually change and parks need to evolve to best serve changing priorities and people. That is why the Parks Advisory Committee has included in its yearly set of objectives the development of a study plan for the preservation and smooth transition of our park system to serve our dynamic and changing community needs.

City Councils of the past have been committed to our park system, and I believe this City Council is, as well. Prior Lake is a recreation community and should remain that way. We see the proof every day.

Look at our many effective sports associations. These associations understand the value of youth sports. Look at all other activities that make our lives better, and, indeed, longer. We need places to walk, bike, or roller blade in our community.

From a purely economic perspective, the money we invest in our park system is retained in the value of our residential and business properties, and in the value of our quality of life. Our parks, wetlands and trails are a key element in making Prior Lake a wonderful place to call home.