EA Update #2, March 29 2024

EA's Flood Defence Proposals and Manor Farm Park

Hello again and thank you for asking to be updated on developments arising from the Environment Agency's plans for Manor Farm Park. There is quite a lot to report!

Environment Agency letter to residents:

On 28th March, the EA posted out letters to 24,000 homes in Stirchley, Weoley and Selly Oak, and Bournville and Cotteridge wards. Because of the bank holiday weekend they will probably not arrive until the middle or late next week. However, they also emailed the letter to everyone that had previously been in touch with them so you can read it by clicking here.

We are very aware that for many park users, particularly those living in Whitehill Lane, literally a stone's throw from the Great Meadow / proposed future flood retention area, not including Northfield Ward in their mailout is a serious omission by the EA. If you live in Northfield and you don't get a letter we encourage you to write to them direct asking why you have not been included.

We note that the EA have now couched the proposals in terms of their aim being *'to enhance park landscapes and increase their biodiversity value'.* They also deny that they will be creating concrete dams, however in a recent reply to queries by local resident Trevor Wilson, they explain that the works will consist of *"a large embankment to hold water back in times of flood, a fixed opening to allow a certain amount of water through the embankment, and a spillway (slightly lower than crest level) to allow extreme flood events to pass over the top of the embankment in a controlled way. Usually made from grasscrete or similar to provide* ***a strong firm concrete base*** *for grass to establish within."* We leave you to draw your own conclusions.

Survey:

Our survey analysis is complete and the report finalised. A summary follows, but you can access the full report by clicking here. A simplified pictorial version is in production for display purposes.

We stopped collecting responses on 8th March when we reached 425 and only 7 people were in favour, as the results were unequivocally showing the local community is against the proposals as they stand. Thank you to everyone who completed the survey and apologies to anyone who tried to but found it closed.



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Summary of the Survey Report

In February 2024 the Friends of Manor Farm Park surveyed local residents for their views about the impact of the Environment Agency's Flood alleviation proposals on Manor Farm Park. 425 people (75% living in B29 or B31) responded within 3 weeks.

People's initial reactions to the proposals were almost universally negative, with many strong emotions expressed – horrified, concerned, disgusted, devastated, angry, shocked, appalled and upset featuring most highly. Views on the proposal included disgraceful, ridiculous, disastrous and unnecessary.

94% of respondents were against the proposal, 4% unsure and just 2% in favour of the EA's plans. However, 17% were potentially willing to support a smaller proposal if it used only the Great Meadow for water retention and maintained the path through it. 48% were not sure and wanted further details before committing, wanting assurances regarding the preservation of the park's environment, wildlife and history. 36% rejected the idea of a more contained area being used. All three groups were unified in wanting to preserve the park's natural beauty, historical value and role as a community space, and all pressed for alternative solutions to be explored.

The EA proposal sparked deep emotional responses from local residents, highlighting the profound impact it could have on their individual and families' lives and the community as a whole. Many recurring themes emerged including the park's natural beauty, usability and recreational space and its contribution to wildlife conservation, physical and mental well-being, local heritage, and community identity and cohesion.

Respondents described their emotional connections to the park and its use over generations. They fear the negative impact on their use of the park for recreation, relaxation, exercise, play and socialisation and the disruption of daily routines such as dog walking, jogging or commuting to work or school. People are worried about the impact on children if access to play areas is lost or compromised as well as safety concerns of having a five meter high dam holding back a large volume of water. They bemoan the potential loss of vital green space and impact on the park's diverse wildlife, natural habitats and ecosystem. Many highlighted the park's benefit to their physical and mental health and wellbeing and overall quality of life, relying on it to connect with nature, stay fit, and reduce stress. They fear the development would negatively affect their health. The proposed dam would significantly impact the park's usability, making routes through and around the park longer and less scenic, particularly the impact on the Merritt's Brook Greenway walking and cycling route which runs through the Great Meadow. Changes to the current pathways would impact cyclists, wheelchair users, those with impaired mobility and families with buggies. Many people view the plan as a betrayal of the Cadbury's legacy, and fear the erosion of the park's historical and cultural significance. They also fear the limitation on community space, cohesion and social interaction, causing irreparable loss to the attractiveness of the neighbourhood and the wider community, impacting on house prices and insurance premiums.

Many respondents call for the EA to improve consultation, question the necessity of flood prevention measures in an area not prone to flooding itself, ask for transparency about the assumptions and calculations it's based on, and offer many alternative suggestions. They also dread the disruption caused by the two year construction phase and potential park closure.

Overall respondents advocate passionately for the EA to leave Manor Farm Park alone and seek alternatives. If the EA proceeds with the current plans it is likely to result in a public outcry and vigorous opposition.

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Press releases:

We have issued press releases covering both the EA mailout and our survey report widely to local media so look out for any coverage.

BBC Midlands Today:

Did you see the item shown last week, 21st March, on the morning, lunchtime and evening news? It began with a look at a scheme in Sandwell Valley Country Park with an EA representative talking about the benefits already reaped by the dam constructed there across the River Tame. (NB Compared to Manor Farm Park, Sandwell Valley Park is considerably bigger, the river is considerably wider than our brooks and bypasses all their lakes, and residential properties are not as close to the dam as here. Nor is it clear whether it would be a similar construction.) A reporter then went to Weoley Hill Park and interviewed a representative of their Friends group who spoke eloquently about their opposition to the proposal. Unfortunately the iPlayer link has expired.



Liaison with the EA

Unfortunately our EA link, Customers & Engagement Specialist Zoe Wilson, having given us assurances that she would be with us right through the project, has left. Her replacement, Delyth Evans, has apparently been fully briefed and we are already in touch with her although it is unlikely that she will meet us until some time in May.

Delyth reports that the EA is not able to respond to the 100 questions that we submitted on 4th March, within the Freedom of Information Act requirements of 20 working days. We will let you know when we get answers to our comprehensive list of queries about the scheme.

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We haven't heard anything further about the preliminary investigations so assume that they will commence around the second week of April.

We have scrutinized the latest version of the concept plans for Manor Farm Park on the EA website (click here to see a clear version) and found some subtle changes including the removal of the word 'grasscrete' from the spillway, and also 'footprint will be slightly larger to accommodate higher crest levels of 148.8m either side of spillway'. The whole section on safety, health, environmental and welfare information has gone, including 'Increased flood risk to park – risk to public within park during inundation'. We don't know whether this is a PR exercise or as a result of genuine recalculations of the plans. The Merritt's Brook Greenway path is still not shown running through the Great Meadow. We await the next version.

Donations:

Donations have enabled us to fund the banners in the park and the survey analysis, and we have surplus ready for our next steps. If you would like to donate to future costs you can do so by online banking to 'Friends of Manor Farm Park' (business account) Sort Code: **20-08-44** A/C number: **40430692.** Reference: "<Your name(s)> FLOOD". Alternatively, pay by PayPal - simply click PayPal.me/FoMFP2023 , it will ask you to sign into your account, just take it from there.

Staying informed:

We continue to liaise with local Councillors and our MP however we do encourage you to contact local Councillors Miranda Perks (miranda.perks@birmingham.gov.uk), Jamie Tenant Jamie.Tennant@Birmingham.gov.uk and MP gary.sambrook.mp@parliament.uk yourselves.

To keep up to date with latest developments log on to the Environment Agency website which has just been updated: Bourn and Lower Rea Flood Risk Management Scheme - Environment Agency - Citizen Space (environment-agency.gov.uk). An analysis of text changes on the plan is underway.

We also recommend that you sign up to receive their regular newsletters. You can join from the web, email your contact details to TheBournFRMS@environment-agency.gov.uk or call its National Customer Contact Centre during office hours on 03708 506 506. We also encourage you to send your comments and thoughts to them directly on the proposals as they are currently presented. We are happy to receive copies of your submissions.

As well as these updates, keep an eye on our Facebook page, noticeboards and website www.friendsofmanorfarmpark.org.uk

Membership of the Friends:

Issues arising like the EA proposals show how very important it is to have organisations such as the Friends to protect the park, represent the interest of park users and the local community, and to mobilise individuals and networks quickly when needed. More than 20 new members have joined us in the past few weeks. If you are not already a member and would like to join to find out not just about the EA developments, but also everything going on in the park and to be kept up to dates with activities and events then please get in touch with our Membership Secretary on fompfmembership@gmail.com for details; membership remains at just £5 a year.

If you know someone who would also like to be updated on just the EA plans for Manor Farm Park they can write to MFPFloodupdates+subscribe@googlegroups.com
Thanks for your ongoing interest, we will keep you informed when we have more information to share.