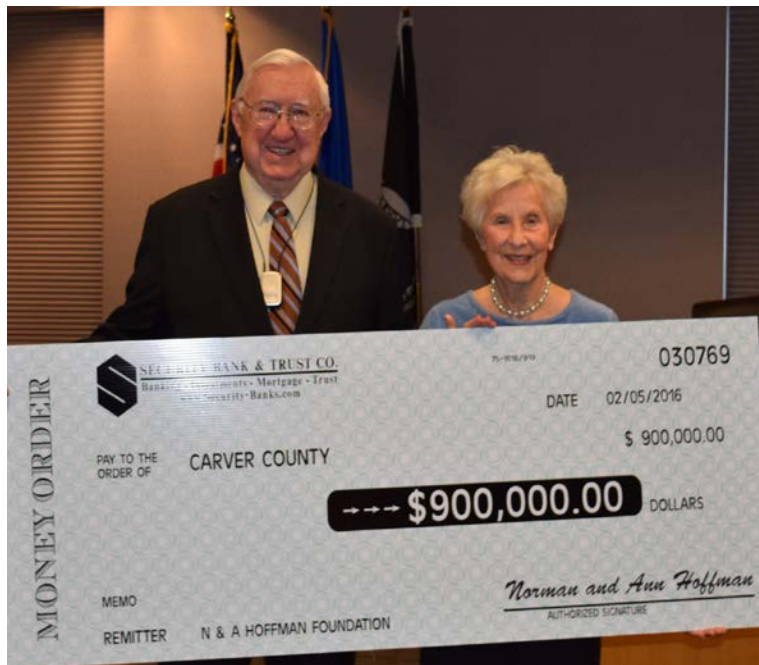


Board accepts \$900,000 donation for Coney Island cleanup



Carver County Commissioners, at the March 1 Board Meeting, accepted a \$900,000 donation for Coney Island cleanup efforts from the Norman and Ann Hoffman Foundation. The donation marks a final step in a complex process undertaken by the Hoffmans to ensure the land will be developed for public use as part of Lake Waconia Regional Park.

“It’s been a long journey,” Norman Hoffman told Board members. “I never realized how difficult it would be to donate land and to give it away. It only took me 13 years!”

Hoffman’s vision for donating the land began in 2003 when he heard talk of plans to develop the island in ways he didn’t think were sustainable. It prompted him to try and block that effort by purchasing land parcels from the island’s six other property owners. It took roughly a decade to reach that goal, but Hoffman earned high marks from Carver County officials for sticking to his vision.

“He had a vision about preserving (Coney Island’s) history, cleaning up the island, providing recreation opportunities of picnicking, camping, trails, wildlife observation and use of the island for the Fourth of July Celebration,” Carver County Parks Director Martin Walsh said. “He wanted the island to be enjoyed by the average Joe and his family.”

Board Chair James Ische thanked the Hoffmans, calling their efforts “an incredible undertaking,” and Commissioner Tim Lynch publicly acknowledged Hoffman’s perseverance in seeing the project through to the end.

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“Most people would have given up after six months,” Lynch said, remarking on how much the public will benefit from being able to access the island as park land. “We’ve always known Lake Waconia is a gem in the middle of Carver County – it always has been – and now we’re going to have a park in the middle of that gem.”

Efforts to transfer ownership of the land to the County officially began in 2014 when the Hoffmans engaged The Trust for Public Land (TPL), a nonprofit organization specializing in land protection. The TPL did due diligence to have the property appraised and to obtain a review of the appraisal. It also conducted a Phase I Assessment of the island for hazardous materials and worked with both parties to formulate a funding strategy and transition of ownership.

The County process included making a request to the Metropolitan Council in 2015 to use Park Acquisition Opportunity Funds to purchase the 30-acre island as an extension to the Lake Waconia Park. Use of those funds required a 25 percent local match. The Hoffmans agreed to provide the \$350,000 in matching funds by selling the property for 75 percent of its appraised value. The County purchased the property for \$1,005,097 on Feb. 4 and formally accepted the \$900,000 donation for cleanup on March 1.

Bob McGillivray, senior project member for the TPL, said the Hoffman's ongoing efforts to ensure public ownership of Coney Island is unparalleled in the work he has done preserving land for public use.

“I want to thank the Hoffmans for their extreme level of generosity in making this happen,” McGillivray said. “I have been engaged in the conservation field – the protection of land – for many, many years. And I can tell you that I have never seen the level of generosity that the Hoffmans have exhibited in connection with the protection of this island.”

The County is in the midst of planning the development of Coney Island and Lake Waconia Regional Park using input from public meetings. In addition to using the island for recreational activities, the plans include historical interpretation efforts to support Hoffman's request to preserve its history.

Coney Island's history as a popular summer destination dates back to the 1880s when there were cottages and three hotels on the island. The University of Minnesota Gophers football team held pre-season practices on the island's football field from 1903 to 1905. Even after the resort traffic dwindled in the 1920s, the island's popularity continued as a weekend dinner and dancing spot.

By 1960, however, the island was completely vacated, and vandalism began taking its toll. The Waconia Bicentennial Committee's Island Committee led efforts to rehabilitate the island in 1975, and the island was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1976. While a study was conducted on possible uses for the island, high costs prevented development.

Work on the Master Plan for Lake Waconia Regional Park and Coney Island will continue over the next several months. Plans include developing a timeline for cleaning up the island, but until that cleanup is completed, the island will remain off-limits to the public. Those who trespass on the island are subject to fines and/or prosecution. A completion date for the project has not been set, but it is expected Coney Island will remain closed to the public during 2016.

Lake Waconia Park is located east of Waconia off Highway 5 at 8170 Paradise Lane. The 130-acre shoreline park offers views of Coney Island. Existing facilities include a sledding hill, picnic shelter, play equipment, restrooms, swimming beach, picnic tables, volleyball court and grills. Park hours are from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily.

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