

**CITY OF LEXINGTON
WORKSHOP AGENDA
Thursday, March 16, 2017
Immediately following Council meeting
City Hall**

1. Call to Order: Mayor Kurth

2. Roll Call: DeVries – Hughes – Harris - Murphy

3. Discussion Items:

- A. Discuss planting prairie grass on Lake Drive – Councilmember Harris **pp. 1-5**
- B. Discuss purchasing electronic tablets for Council packet distribution

4. Staff Input

5. Council Input

6. Adjourn

HOME & GARDEN

Minnesota back yards host a prairie revival



By DYLAN PEERS MCCOY , SPECIAL TO THE STAR TRIBUNE
December 09, 2014 - 2:44 PM



When Todd Gerlach planted his first prairie, he was trying to cut back on yard work. Compared to conventional lawns, mature prairies require very little maintenance, so Gerlach converted about a quarter acre in his backyard. It turned out, that was just the beginning.

“I got a lot more enjoyment from watching it year-to-year than I thought I would,” said Gerlach, laughing. “It’s really neat to see it evolve. Especially the first few years, the different flowers that come up.”

On a brisk afternoon not long ago, Gerlach drove a few miles from his home in Prior Lake to his 50-acre plot in Lakeville. After restoring his backyard grassland, Gerlach became so enamored by prairies that he began a much more ambitious project — converting this large tract of farmland to native grassland.

"I wanted to restore the land. It's been conventionally farmed for so long, there's been erosion on the hills and things," Gerlach said. "Originally the land was kind of a prairie or oak savanna."

The fields look the same as most of the cropland around them, but they've already begun their transition to prairie. Gerlach, an oral surgeon who is learning to farm one day at a time, bought the land in 2013. This fall, he rented a no-till planter and planted wildflower and native grass seeds on 31 acres. Once the fields mature, he plans to use the prairie to graze cattle.

Gerlach is not alone. Residents across Scott County are converting land back to prairie — whether it's agricultural land or their own back yards.

"People are just crazy about prairie right now," said Alyssa Alness, a resource conservation technician with the Scott Soil and Water Conservation District.

A big part of Alness's job is reaching out to landowners to help them learn prairie restoration. "A lot of people are getting interested in it. But they don't necessarily know where to go."

Multiple motivations

Over the last year, Alness led three workshops for interested landowners. And when they commit to restoring grasslands, Alness helps them develop plans for planting native species and maintaining the prairies.

People restore prairies for all kinds of reasons. Some would rather live next to prairie than a lawn, some are opposed to the pesticides and fertilizers used in conventional farming, and still others are trying to create habitat for native animal species. Increasingly, landowners are planting prairies because native wildflowers support threatened pollinators.

Currently, landowners must restore at least an acre of land to qualify for support from the district. But Alness said there's so much interest in backyard prairies that the district plans to lower the minimum plot size to half an acre next year.

The conservation district provides more than just guidance. It also offers substantial funding to help owners establish new prairies. Gerlach got a grant of close to \$7,500 to help defray the cost of buying and planting seeds for his plot — over half of what he expects to spend establishing the grassland.

Prairie restoration programs have become so popular that the district has a waiting list of eight landowners looking to participate, and is applying for additional funding from the state.

The vast majority of the funding for prairie restoration in Scott County comes from the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment. Passed in 2008, the amendment increased the state's sales tax, allocating that revenue to preserving Minnesota's environment, parks and heritage.

Prairie advocates across the state say that funding from the Legacy Amendment has opened up new opportunities for preserving and restoring grasslands.

Since 2010, the conservation district has received more than \$250,000 in Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment funding. Most of that money has gone toward grassland restoration, helping to restore 154 acres.

The tall grass prairies of the Midwest are considered one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world. Since settlers came to Minnesota in the 19th century, more than 98 percent of the state's prairies have been destroyed. Many landowners who give their land over to grasslands are hoping to make a small dent in that loss.

Mowing, burning

Once grasslands are established, they're pretty low-maintenance — as long as owners mow or burn them once a year, prairies should stay in good working order. But young prairies require a little more work.

"We're supposed to keep the weeds down as much as we can," said Linda Moen. When she and her husband began restoring the grassland in their yard, they were stunned at how hard it was to keep the thistle in check. "We've had to actually go out and buy a couple scythes and go in and whack those weeds down one by one."

When the Moens moved to Jordan two years ago, their new house came with five acres of farmland. The prior owners had rented the plot out to a farmer, who grew crops like corn and soybeans, using pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. But when Linda Moen read an article about prairie restoration, she was immediately intrigued.

With the help of the conservation district, the couple took their five-acre patch out of agricultural land and established restored grassland.

"What we're doing at least in our hearts, we're trying to bring back that prairie for the bees, the butterflies, the pollinators. And we need that because it's getting scary," Moen said. "They're disappearing."

Like many of the plots that are converted back to grassland, the Moen land was never ideal for agriculture. With today's technology, farmers were able to make the plot productive. But the land was on a slope.

“We need our farmers, obviously,” Moen said, “but the way our land is situated it’s kind of hilly, and a lot of that runoff and silt was going into Sand Creek.”

Over the next few years, the Moens hope to put a footpath in their prairie, so they can walk through it with their grandchildren, teaching them about Minnesota’s native habitats and animals.

Todd Gerlach, on the other hand, doesn’t intend to keep his restored grassland as a nature preserve. Instead, he has found yet another way to avoid mowing. Once the prairie is established, he plans to use it as grazing land for beef cattle. The way Gerlach sees it, grazing has two benefits — it maintains prairie, so he doesn’t have to mow or burn it. And it will allow him to raise livestock and other animals off the land.

“Out west, a lot of cattle graze on the native grasses and a lot of them graze throughout the year. They’ll dig through the snow to get it,” Gerlach said. “The native grasses, they’re taller. Some of them stand up through the snow. They give the cattle something enticing.”

Dylan Peers McCoy is a Twin Cities-based freelance journalist.

Comments

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