

Belle Isle Conservancy planning long-term vision for 'Detroit jewel'

MARK S. LEE | July 22, 2015



Photo by Natalie Broda/Crain's Detroit Business

The Belle Isle Conservatory is just one of the many attractions on the island park in the Detroit River.

Many view Belle Isle as Detroit's ultimate jewel. Nestled east of downtown and surrounded by the Detroit River, the city of Detroit and Canada, this beautiful island offers views unlike any other. However, Belle Isle, like the city itself, is going through a transformation under the leadership of Michele Hodges.

Hodges became president of the Belle Isle Conservancy in January 2013. The organization was formed in the fall of 2011 through a merger of four existing nonprofits. The new conservancy, in partnership with the city of Detroit, will bring more private and public resources to the island park.



Michele Hodges

Prior to joining the conservancy, Hodges had been president of the Troy Chamber of Commerce since 2001, and most recently worked at the local government level managing downtown development authorities, economic/community development initiatives and the Detroit Regional Chamber to attract investment to the Detroit Region.

I recently asked Hodges for her thoughts on Belle Isle, the conservancy and plans for the island's future.

Lee: What is the history and role of the Belle Isle Conservancy and what impact has it had on the island?

Hodges: The Belle Isle Conservancy was created in 2012, and is the product of four nonprofits that elected to merge in order to better fulfill the mission of protecting, preserving and enhancing all of Belle Isle's exceptional assets. The founding organizations include the Friends of Belle Isle (founded in 1972, and thereby granting the conservancy deep roots in the community), Friends of the Belle Isle Aquarium, Belle Isle Botanical Society and Belle Isle Women's Committee. The city of Detroit maintains ownership of the island, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, along with the Michigan Department of Transportation and Michigan State Police, is responsible for day-to-day management and operations, under the provisions of a 30-year lease of the island.

The conservancy partners with both entities, with specific duties including environmental stewardship, volunteer management (3,000-plus per year), community engagement, management of the Belle Isle Aquarium, historic preservation, fundraising, programming, strategic planning and more.

In 2014, the conservancy raised \$1.3 million and is on track to exceed that figure in 2015. With that said, however, the needs are great, with an estimated \$330 million in deferred maintenance and virtually zero dollars spent in capital improvements over a five-year period.

Lee: How is the conservancy funded?

Hodges: The conservancy is funded via a combination of foundation support, individual donor contributions, memberships, corporate sponsorships, event revenue, residuals and others.

Lee: How many people visit Belle Isle this year and how have the dynamics changed since becoming a state park?

Hodges: It is difficult to measure and compare user data because it was not collected prior to the MDNR's management of the island. However, we are on track to experience 4 million visitors in 2015, which is an increase over 2014. With regard to the dynamics, we have seen a shift in the user base and are working to ensure a solid representation of the Detroit community exists.

Lee: For those who have not visited in awhile, what noticeable changes have been implemented over the last two years, for example?

Hodges: The MDNR (in tandem with MDOT and the Michigan State Police) has placed its focus on basic amenities that enhance the park user's experience, including grass cutting, flower bed maintenance, upgraded management of the conservatory, trash management, picnic table reboarding, roof repairs, removal of diseased trees, programming, crisis management, public lighting, bike paths, road improvements, law enforcement and more.

The conservancy works to support the MDNR, with assistance in the operation of the James Scott Memorial Fountain, installation of chairs around the fountain, various programming initiatives, removal of invasive species, plantings, restoration of the historic horse stables roof, upgrades to Sunset Point and management of the Belle Isle Aquarium topping the list of accomplishments visible to the park user.

Lee: Over the next year, additional changes visitors will see?

Hodges: We are in the midst of two important planning processes, the outcomes of which will dictate priorities in the coming years. The first is a strategic planning process being led by the New York City-based Biederman Redevelopment Ventures, which will focus on governance

strategies, programming opportunities, capital improvement priorities, ease of access to the island for park users and more. The second is a cultural campus plan for the Belle Isle Aquarium and Conservatory, which also takes into consideration the Dossin Great Lakes Museum and Belle Isle Nature Zoo. Outcomes will include programming and infrastructure priorities, coordinated management solutions and a financial plan for sustaining the facilities.

Both planning initiatives will drive highly visible, exciting projects for the island that will clearly support and enhance the park user's experience, particularly when coupled with a bolstered community engagement effort.

Lee: What is the conservancy's longer-term vision for the park?

Hodges: We believe strongly in our mission to protect, preserve, restore and enhance Belle Isle and all of its unique assets. Next steps will be driven by the outcomes of the planning processes outlined above.

Lee: I recently had a tour of the riverfront and noticed significant improvements. Are the Detroit riverfront and the conservancy collaborating on various projects? If so, what are a couple of examples?

Hodges: The Detroit RiverFront Conservancy is an important partner, and collaboration between the two is robust. We work together to coordinate programming, transit-related matters and hold joint support for a vision that upholds both entities, recognizing that together there is strength. With time, collaboration will mature and produce measurable results.

Lee: How does Belle Isle compare to other big-city parks in terms of history, size, etc. Other fun facts?

Hodges: Belle Isle is 982 acres, which is 100 acres larger than Central Park (in New York City), both of which were inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted. It is home to America's oldest operating urban aquarium, and has an architectural, historic, cultural and natural pedigree. Little-known facts include the albino deer that were a gift from the king of France, the story behind James Scott and his ties to the historic fountain, the former speakeasy in the Belle Isle Aquarium, links to prohibition and the Underground Railroad and the role the island plays as an important repository of community memories, traditions and culture.