Central Staff Analysis of Executive's Proposed Sportsfield/wetland Complex at Sand Point/Magnuson Park W. Alves 4/19/04

Summary of Findings

1. Need for additional sportsfield capacity in Seattle – Demand for sportsfields in the City at peak times exceeds availability. Based on user surveys and per capita field standards, Seattle is providing about 60% of what the Parks Department characterizes as "reasonable accommodation." However, it appears that Seattle is doing a better job of providing sportsfields than most other major west coast cities, none of which seems close to meeting the per capita standard/reasonable accommodation level. Due to competing municipal needs and tight budgets, few of parks and recreation managers in these cities believe a significant expansion of sportsfield capacity is feasible. The initial capital cost of expanding Seattle's sportsfield capacity to Parks' reasonable level will exceed $100 million.

2. How can Seattle expand sportsfield capacity?

- Build new fields – few suitable locations in Seattle besides Sand Point/Magnuson Park. Very expensive and prevents other beneficial uses of the parkland such as passive recreation and wildlife habitat.
- Add lights and all-weather synthetic surfaces to existing fields –abundant opportunities in Seattle. Improves play and may reduce maintenance costs. Consistent with Parks policy. Still quite expensive although less so than a new field.
- Improve condition of existing fields – 26% of Seattle fields are in poor condition. Improving them is probably the least expensive way to increase capacity. But feasible capacity expansion here is less than achievable by adding lights or synthetic turf. Improving grass fields will not expand winter capacity.
- Provide incentives to encourage off-peak field use – Could be very inexpensive but is untested and possibly complicated to administer.

3. Where in Seattle should new sportsfield capacity go? – The Parks COMPLAN and Joint Athletic Facilities Development Plan (JAFDP) say that fields should be put in areas that are deficient, that where possible most fields should be located within one to two miles of users, and that heavily used and lighted synthetic turf fields should be spread throughout the City. While these plans don't identify which parts of Seattle are particularly short of fields, one frequently cited justification for the concentration of lighted, synthetic turf fields at Sand Point/Magnuson Park is that the northeast part of Seattle is particular deficient in sportsfields. But Parks has not made a convincing case that this is so and the area around Sand Point/Magnuson Park actually has a greater portion of the City's sportsfield capacity – 14% - than its share of the City's population – 8 to 9%. It is not clear that northeast Seattle is significantly more deficient in sportsfields than any other part of Seattle. The executive's proposed 11 lit, synthetic turf fields and a sports meadow at Sand Point/Magnuson Park would nearly double sportsfield capacity in northeast Seattle - from 19,500 to 38,000 field hours per year. While other projects are expanding sportsfield capacity in other parts of the City, these expansions are far more modest than what is proposed for northeast Seattle.

4. What is the case for lighted sportsfields and how are other cities using them?
Field lighting substantially increases the capacity of a sportsfield, especially when used in conjunction with all-weather synthetic turf. For this reason many densely populated cities where land is scarce are turning to field lighting to get more capacity out of existing fields. About a quarter of the sportsfields in Seattle are lit. In many California cities, more than half the fields are lit. Some have questioned whether field lighting is needed where youth sports are a priority. In 2003, 40% of all play under lights on Seattle fields was by youth teams. And even where the direct beneficiaries are adult player, allowing adult play later at night under lights reduces competition with younger players for earlier time slots.

The proposed sportsfield development at Sand Point/Magnuson Park differs from lit sportsfield complexes in other cities in several ways. First is scale. A typical large lighted urban sportsfield complex consists of 4 or 5 fields. Second is location - these complexes tend to be situated away from residential areas or in an area already impacted by intense activity – such as along a freeway or near a major airport. The final difference is the operating hours and how they are set. Almost all the other cities turn field lights off by 10 PM or earlier and most allow for more neighborhood control of lighting hours than does Seattle. Surprisingly, many cities found that residents' fears regarding the impact of glare and spill light from proposed lighted sportsfields nearby were not borne out. Once fields with state of the art lighting were constructed and opened for play, most complaints were about noise and traffic.

5. How can neighborhood impacts of sportsfield lighting be mitigated?
Besides the obvious measures of using state of the art lighting systems, reducing the number of lit fields, and turning off the lights earlier, there are several possibilities. One is to provide the minimum intensity of field light consistent with safe play. The Parks Department proposes to light the Sand Point/Magnuson Park fields to the Illuminating Engineering Society of North American (IESNA) level IV. Level IV is the lowest intensity level and is intended for recreational play with few spectators. Some have suggested providing even dimmer lighting at Sand Point/Magnuson Park. But this might be a safety risk to players and pose some liability for the City. Another possibility recommended by a Parks Department sportsfield lighting consultant is to use fewer but brighter (higher wattage) light bulbs to illuminate the fields. This would allow the fields to be lit with fewer poles and hence less visual clutter during the day but has some drawbacks. The Seattle Parks Department has apparently decided not to use the brighter light bulbs at Sand Point/Magnuson Park but has not justified this decision.

6. Can the proposed new wetland function successfully? What steps can the Council take to enhance chances of success?
Recent studies by King County and the State Department of Ecology found that many wetland projects fail. Studies in other states also found a high incidence of failure. Wetland projects fail for many reasons. They often start out poorly designed, are not properly installed, and then receive inadequate maintenance to get them established. Enough appears to be known about why wetland projects fail to make success probable if adequate care is taken. Key among the recommendations for success is a monitoring program for three to five years after completion of wetland construction. The Council may want to add some direction on constructing, designing and maintaining the wetlands to the Sand Point/Magnuson Park Master Plan legislation.