



THE FOREST EXPLORATION CENTER
1800 Forest Exploration Drive
PO Box 13154, Wauwatosa, WI 53213
Info@ForestExplorationCenter.org
ForestExplorationCenter.org
Social Media: ForestExplorationCenter

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Contact Tom Gaertner
Telephone 414-465-2086
Email info@forestexplorationcenter.org
Website www.forestexplorationcenter.org

JOIN US AS WE CELEBRATE
ACHIEVABLE AND MEANINGFUL RECREATION:
The Forest Exploration Center and the Department of Natural Resources
'Welcome All to the Forest'

Wauwatosa, WI, September 1, 2020– The Forest Exploration Center (FEC), a nonprofit organization in joint partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Division of Forestry celebrate the completed accessible nature trail, property entrance road, and parking area that now set the stage for future endeavors in recreation, education and forest stewardship.

ALL ABILITIES NOW HAVE ACCESS TO THE FOREST. The former inaccessible and eroding social footpaths have been improved with the creation of a sustainable, self-guided nature trail experience of natural crushed granite material that meets ADA accessibility guidelines. The trail is designed and built specifically for wheelchair, foot traffic and strollers only and offers a one-mile loop of exploration and discovery under the canopy of the shaded woodland.

Due to prior lack of any accessible entrance to and within the property, countless members of the community have never experienced the solitude and beauty of this 60-acre hardwood forest. To commemorate these improvements in access, site planning and education the FEC and DNR have “virtually cut the ribbon” and welcome all abilities to come into the forest. Plans for an actual ribbon



cutting have been postponed until all are able to gather safely. All visitors are asked to recreate responsibly: keep a safe distance, avoid large gatherings, wear a mask and keep it inclusive.

Tim Ochnikowski, retired Director of the Office for Persons with Disabilities (OPD) was an important partner in making this project a reality and is excited about this new opportunity. "Having an ADA accessible trail adjacent to Wil-O-Way Underwood will open up the possibility of new and creative programming from Goodwill and EasterSeals to the benefit of persons with disabilities, offering something that is currently not available now.

"When we all work together with a similar goal, everyone wins. Having an ADA accessible trail in Underwood Parkway, persons with (and without) disabilities will be winners." says Ochnikowski.

Interim Director of the OPD and long-time partner of the Forest Exploration Center, Mike Bonk, agrees and states: "We are very excited about the new accessible trail. The improved accessible trail will expand the opportunities to many new users and offers a healthy recreational opportunity at a time when many indoor recreational programs are not available for persons with disabilities."

The trail of compacted granite weaves visitors through a self-guided one-mile loop and will host a rotational series of educational exhibits and media. Learn about wildlife, forest ecology and the many stewards of this unique urban forest environment. The loop also connects the Wil-O-Way Underwood facility to the new FEC/DNR site footprint where planning for future amenities and outdoor spaces is underway. The completion of the trail, entrance road, parking and stormwater infrastructure allows the next phase of planning and design to move forward for the development of infrastructure to support educational and recreational initiatives for school groups and the broader Milwaukee community.

Trail improvements have also in turn begun to improve habitat for forest plants and wildlife. DNR Forest Ecologist Brad Hutnik says that "by decreasing the number of entrance trails to the woodland (from 18 to three) and rehabilitating the weaving of social trails we will greatly reduce the spread of invasive species, and improve major sections of forest that were once severely fragmented and disturbed by the crisscross of compacted footpaths. These areas will regenerate over time, securing undisturbed habitat for wildlife and woodland plant populations."

The forest is state owned under sustainable forest management practice by the Wisconsin DNR and under joint partnership with the Forest Exploration Center, with a shared goal to create and sustain a unique woodland learning environment where meaningful opportunities in forestry education, recreation and stewardship are accessible to the broadest audience for current and future generations.

"Our main focus at the Forest Exploration Center is to sustain this unique woodland environment while providing opportunities in education, recreation and stewardship. This trail improvement project enriches that focus by not only engaging and inviting the broadest spectrum of learners and abilities, but by also providing the opportunity and freedom to learn and recreate outdoors at their own pace and ability. We will continue to conserve and restore the forest for the benefit of both humans and wildlife and highlight through outreach and programming what successful forest restoration and sustainable forest management look like." Tom Gaertner, FEC President

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If you would like more information about this topic, please contact Forest Exploration Center President, Tom Gaertner at 414-465-2086 or email info@forestexplorationcenter.org. To become a steward, learn more about trail access, property rules and educational components of the trail, visit www.forestexplorationcenter.org

