

# Dane County Exec. Parisi: Dane County awards nearly \$110,000 grant to The Prairie Enthusiasts to expand Erbe Grassland Preserve

Posted on Thursday, Jan 20, 2022

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Today, County Executive Joe Parisi announced Dane County will award nearly \$110,000 to The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE) for the purchase of 40 acres of property to expand Erbe Grassland Preserve in the Town of Blue Mounds. Acquisition of this land will fill in a gap between TPE owned land, creating a 140 acre preserve that provides critical habitat for rare and declining grasslands birds, prairie vegetation, and prairie-restricted insects. It will also provide recreational opportunities to the public all year round, including hiking, bird watching, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, and hunting.

“We are excited to partner with The Prairie Enthusiasts on this land purchase to increase access to recreational opportunities and preserve our natural resources,” said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi. “This effort will help ensure Erbe Grassland Preserve and its environmental benefits can be enjoyed for many years to come.”

The 40-acre property is located within the Military Ridge Prairie Heritage Area and the Southwest Grasslands, which are Regional Resource Protection Initiatives under the Dane County Parks and Open Space Plan. The parcel contains remnant prairie, former pasture and cropland, which is enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program.

TPE has been assisting the property’s owners in managing the land for over 20 years, conducting burns and rare species surveys and helping with weed, brush, and tree control, and providing prairie seed for restoration.

“The Goplin family has loved this land and worked closely with us for 22 years now to restore its original remnant prairie. This is a unique opportunity to add 40 acres to an existing 100 acre preserve,” said Debra Behrens, Executive Director of The Prairie Enthusiasts. “Together, with the Dane County Conservation Fund and the WI-DNR Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund, we are protecting critical habitat for rare species for generations to come.”

Erbe Grassland Preserve was original a 63-acre property that consisted of 37 acres of treeless pasture, 26 acres of active cropland, 5 acres of brush pasture, and 3 acres of planted walnut groves. The walnuts were thought to have been planted by a Civilian Conservation Corps crew in 1935. Because a major management goal was expansion of habitat for grassland birds, the brush and walnuts were removed in the winter of 2008 to 2009. The tree and shrub removal was funded by the Pheasant Stamp and Landowner Incentive Programs of the Wisconsin DNR, as well as funds from the Wildlife Conservation Society. An additional 36 acres was added in 2012, making the whole site 99 acres.

The estimated project costs for the acquisition are \$206,900. The Dane County Park Commission recommends up to \$109,400 in county matching funds. A resolution to approve this grant to TPE will be introduced at tonight’s County Board meeting. It is expected to be approved in the coming weeks.