

## Urbandale Middle School Wetland/Construction Route Explanation

For anyone who has had the opportunity to attend or visit Urbandale Middle School (UMS), it is clear as our enrollment continues to grow and as we continue to develop programming to meet the needs of all of our students, the facility has reached its limits. Given this, the Board of Directors and UCSD administrators examined numerous options in a very thoughtful and public manner to upgrade the UMS facility. The decision was made, as was the case with the renovation and construction project recently completed at Urbandale High School, that any changes at UMS would be done on the existing UMS site and that students would not be bused off-site during the construction. To pay for this renovation, the District would bond against future receipts garnered through the approved Statewide Penny Sales Tax.

The UMS site also contains an area that has been used by the District and community groups for practice fields. Adjacent to this green space were sections of land that had become overgrown over thirty years with volunteer trees of low quality, and other non-native and invasive species. What is not always known is that when UMS was first constructed, this area was predominantly free from this type of growth, other than some smaller cottonwood trees by the stream. It was also during this time, an area to the north and east evolved into what is known today as a wetland area. For those agencies who oversee the preservation of wetlands, it does not matter whether the wetland is man-made or natural, yet there are rules now in place to protect such areas that were not in place at the time of the original construction.

Beginning over a year ago, the District began to work with its architects and partners, such as the City of Urbandale to discuss options for making these changes. It was during the preliminary civil work being done by the District, that the wetland area was discovered on the site, and preparations began to see what would be required to continue our renovation plans. The District was aware from the beginning of this process that this was the only site we owned and had available, and realized that this parcel was the largest green space we had in our possession east of the Interstate. When wetland areas are impacted by land development, another wetland area must be created to mitigate any negative impact to the environment.

It was also during these discussions, the City determined that construction traffic entering off of Aurora would contribute unfavorably to the congestion that already occurs and would make it dangerous for the students, staff, parents, and the general public. Therefore it was determined to access the UMS construction site from 76<sup>th</sup> Street, which necessitated a road entering from the northeast off of Townsend Avenue. *This means that as the construction project continues, construction vehicles will be using the route of Meredith to 76<sup>th</sup> Street and then south to Townsend to enter the construction site, so please beware of possibly increased traffic.*

*NOTE: The drainage ditch in that area was considered an ephemeral stream (a stream that only runs constant for about three months a year) by the Corps of Engineers. Ephemeral streams, like wetlands, are important habitat areas, therefore stream mitigation also needed to be included. What many do not know, is when you mitigate a wetland area, the regulations require you to rehabilitate at a ratio larger than a one to one exchange, depending on the type of wetland impacted. In our case, the District needed to create/restore 1.34 acres of wetland for impacting .72 acres of an existing wetland (ratio of 1.86:1). In addition, UMS had to enhance 500 feet of stream to mitigate the 200 feet of the existing stream which was being piped and covered.*

With this information in mind, many options were investigated, including alternative sites (e.g., purchasing land in watershed areas). We also looked at possibilities in working collaboratively with the City of Urbandale since they were preparing to dredge Lakeview Pond. While none of the alternative sites proved financially feasible, the District did want to try to look for a collaborative effort with the City to reduce the burden to taxpayers to do separate projects. The only area that was available, that would meet the requirements of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the regulatory agency that oversees wetlands) was the area just to the north and west of the stream that is on the UMS site. It is important to

mitigate for impacted wetlands nearby, to retain the dispersion of the available habitat.

The area to be converted to wetland was designed by a firm that specializes in wetland mitigation, and was carefully coordinated with the City of Urbandale, so that we could take advantage of any savings to taxpayers since each of us were getting ready for our individual projects. Several public meetings (e.g., Board meetings, public comment periods) were held to discuss the needed changes, as well as to discuss the construction that was to occur at UMS. Information was also made available to the Des Moines Register and was posted on the District's webpage.

Obtaining permits to make these changes did not happen overnight. In addition to the City of Urbandale signing off, a permit needed to be granted by the Corps of Engineers, which included approvals from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act) and the State Historical Preservation Office (Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act).

Please know that everyone involved agonized over the changes that would be necessitated by the wetlands mitigation. The tree removal is required to establish the wetland that is being required by federal statute. When the project is complete, the area will be quite beautiful again, but instead of being a scrub brush, volunteer woodland with non-native and invasive species, it will be palustrine wetland (i.e., marsh-like as opposed to open water) with native species, much like historical Iowa was previous to modern agriculture. The area will be open for the enjoyment of the public, as well as used as a classroom area for the students of Urbandale.

The District was also able to work with the City of Urbandale to combine the excess dirt taken from the UMS construction site with the dredging spoils from the Lakeview Pond project sponsored by the City of Urbandale. This fill will be deposited on the existing practice fields, but will be fenced off to make sure the area is safe. Once tilled and seeded, an extended growing time will be allowed through the summer of 2011, so that our practice fields will be much improved and meet the needs of our students and our community groups for years to come.

On the one hand, the decision to remove trees and make large changes to the area behind UMS was a difficult decision to make. Yet, the decision was always driven by the fact that the District's true goal was to make sure that the UMS facility be enlarged to serve our student population and meet their needs. Everything the district has done has been with careful consideration of the consequences. We always wish to be good neighbors, but we must be responsible educators to meet the needs of our students and do so in a way that is fiscally responsive to our community.