



To: Urban Design Committee
From: Planning and Preservation Division
Date: August 10, 2017
RE: **Final Location, Character, and Extent review of Bill Robinson Park Improvements, 700 N. 37th St.; UDC No. 2017-27**

I. APPLICANT

Deborah Morton, Department of Parks, Recreation, & Community Facilities

II. LOCATION

700 N. 37th St.

Property Owner:

CITY OF RICHMOND RECREATION & PARKS

III. PURPOSE

The application is for the final location, character, and extent review of improvements to a public park located in the Chimborazo neighborhood.

IV. SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATION

Staff finds that this final plan for Bill Robinson Park Improvements will increase accessibility, utilization, and sustainability of an existing public amenity. Repairs to the existing sidewalk along M Street and the addition of a parallel stone dust path, will allow for increased accessibility to the playground and other amenities. The relocation of new basketball courts to the corner of 37th and M Streets will further reduce runoff from the park as a whole and will provide Franklin Military Academy easier access. Replacing the existing basketball courts with a new planted area will increase natural infiltration and soil stabilization. Additionally, the landscaping plan aims to increase biodiversity in the park with select plants and shrubs.

Staff is supportive of the proposed design for improvements to Bill Robinson Park. Therefore, Staff recommends that the Urban Design Committee recommend the Planning Commission approve the conceptual design with the following recommendations:

- Plant shade trees to further enhance passive and active recreation when possible
- Resurface the blacktop with a comparable material that is rigid, yet more permeable, if possible

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V. FINDINGS OF FACT

a. Site Description and Surrounding Context

The proposed project is located in the Oakwod-Chimborazo National Historic District. The site spans the width of two city blocks with N. 37th Street to the east, N. 35th Street to the west, M Street to the south, and O Street to the north. It is located in an area zoned R-5, and is across from Franklin Military Academy on N.

37th Street, single-family detached homes border the park on the other three sides. The northern side of the property abuts a retirement community, an informal line of mature trees delineates the retirement community and the park.

The park currently consists of: a blacktop, two basketball courts, horseshoe pits, a baseball field, playground equipment, and two tennis courts. The tennis courts and basketball courts are in disrepair and are in need of updating.

The current location of the basketball courts has caused infiltration and erosion problems along the sloping bank that parallels M Street. As a result, the sidewalk has become overgrown and unusable. In addition, the existing basketball courts are situated closely behind a row of houses, which has limited visibility, is difficult to access, and has raised safety concerns. Finally, there is large, established tree at this location whose roots are causing cracking and uplifting of the courts.

The layout of the Park currently lacks definition, which has contributed to its under-utilization.

b. Scope of Review

The project is subject to location, character, and extent review as part of a “public park” under Section 17.07 of the City Charter.

c. UDC Review History

Staff was unable to find any existing records related to projects involving this site.

d. Project Description

The proposed improvements to the Bill Robinson Park are largely necessitated by the desire for increased security, park utilization, and environmental sustainability in the Park. The surrounding community has expressed concern regarding these factors.

In order to achieve long-term solutions for greater safety, sustainability, and increased utilization, the City of Richmond Department of Parks & Recreation, in partnership with the Friends of Bill Robinson Park, 7th District City Council, and the City of Richmond Police Department, has developed the following improvements for implementation at Bill Robinson Park:

The existing blacktop area will be resurfaced in order to provide an updated and safer amenity on which children can play. A permeable paving system is being explored for this surface. Permeable paving is intended to assist with water infiltration, and also mitigation against future cracking of the surface. New playground games will also be re-painted on this surface. Updating and beautifying this amenity will help to make a more welcome entrance to the Playground along 35th Street.

New basketball courts will be constructed at the intersection of 37th and M Streets. This relocation will: alleviate the runoff and erosion problem that occurs along M Street, increase visibility, and allow easier access to the courts from the street. Providing activity at this location will also help to engage the sidewalks, helping to encourage visitors into the park. In addition, it will benefit the Franklin Military Academy, who has expressed an interest in having the basketball courts closer to the school.

A planted area will occupy the location of the existing basketball courts, helping to increase water infiltration and soil stabilization, while also creating a natural border that defines this edge and serves to beautify the Park. Additionally, these plantings will provide the community with a much-desired and requested ornamental community garden. Many of these plants were chosen for their ability to attract butterflies, hummingbirds, and other insects in order to increase the biodiversity and interest within the Park, while also increasing greater connection and awareness to place.

Finally, the sidewalk along 37th Street discontinues, and a stone dust sidewalk has been proposed to assist with access and the sidewalk along M Street will be repaired.

e. Master Plan

The subject property are located in the East Planning district as defined by the citywide Master Plan. The Plan suggests that this site remain as public and open space and encourages additional park and open space to be added to existing inventory within the East Planning district as long as it can be properly maintained, and access and security can be controlled so as to no present problems for adjacent residential neighborhoods and/or business owners (page 171).

f. Urban Design Guidelines

The Environment section of the Urban Design Guidelines state that “Active parks should have adequate facilities (i.e. sports fields, trash receptacles, benches, running paths, etc.) to accommodate intended users.” The General Characteristics section maintains that “successful public parks, both small and large, active or passive, share certain qualities, which include the ability to attract and entertain visitors, access and connectivity to surrounding areas, and safety and comfort.” Furthermore the Design Considerations section suggests that “impacts to the natural landscape should be assessed and should generally be minimized when constructing man-made elements. A preference should be given toward materials and construction techniques which improve energy efficiency and water/soil quality. Lighting and landscaping should allow for surveillance and policing activities, but should be designed primarily to accommodate the intended use of the park” (page 9).

The Guidelines express support for low-impact development, the goal of which is to “mimic a site's predevelopment hydrology by using design techniques that infiltrate, filter, store, evaporate, and detain runoff close to its source” (page 11).

The Public Facilities section of the Urban Design Guidelines contains relevant suggestions on site programming such as “connectivity from the site to adjacent areas should be considered” (page 14).

VI. ATTACHMENTS

- a. Vicinity Map**
- b. Application**
- c. Plans**