

Belle Isle Nature Exploration Area Project Narrative

Purpose

The proposed Belle Isle Nature Exploration Area (NEA) is a gateway to adventure in the James River Park System (JRPS). A play space built of re-purposed park materials, including tree trunks, boulders, driftwood, mulch, live edge tables and benches, and historic granite curbstone, the NEA will invite children to build confidence outdoors on Richmond's Belle Isle. The NEA project is one component in an effort to expand the range of recreational experiences on Belle Isle which, according to a 2021 use study, has the most diverse and highest frequency of users in JRPS. Part of James River Park System's goal is to provide experiences that meet the needs of diverse park-goers and to broaden access to the Park through the provision of accessible recreational resources. The NEA is composed of easily built, low-cost, hyper local, nature-based play features that invite children to sit, stack, climb, dig, hide, balance, jump, gather, and manipulate natural materials. Park staff hope that this ignites a desire in children to recreate in the park and to test their abilities, helping them develop gross motor skills and build resilience as they cultivate a relationship with JRPS.

Background and Context

Like many of Richmond's most beloved public spaces, Belle Isle is a wild place. The qualities that make the island so attractive can also keep people away. The island is remote, overgrown, located under a highway, and wrapped in Class 4 river rapids. And yet, it is in the middle of Virginia's capitol city and has the highest annual visitation of any location in the James River Park System. In spite of its popularity, it is one of Richmond's greatest kept secrets.

Located along the Fall Line in the James River, Belle Isle's physiological characteristics are informed by its hydrology and related to the industrial role the island played in recent Richmond history, from ante-Bellum era Richmond until roughly 1970. Native American tribes further enrich the stories that Belle Isle has to tell. From fish capture to power sourcing for Richmond's first streetcar system, humans have flourished in Richmond because of this island and the whitewater surrounding it. Friends of the James River Park (FOJRP) and JRPS are currently working with Blackstar Cultural Resources to undertake an archeological assessment of Belle Isle that will support future public-facing interpretation and educational programs that will continue to enrich understanding of these narratives.

Furthermore, JRPS is developing a Natural Resource Management Plan that will enhance conservation priorities and practices undertaken by Park staff and volunteers to ensure that the Park remains wild, and that staff understand how to protect Richmond's unique ecologies. The NRMP will map the presence of sensitive ecosystems, indigenous plant communities, and rare plants, ensuring that park managers avoid disturbance of habitat and native vegetation.

Working with JRPS and FOJRP, Marvel landscape architects developed the NEA to demonstrate the potential of Belle Isle to better engage and embrace the users who are visiting the park in higher numbers each year. By making improvements in underutilized, highly disturbed areas beneath the Route 1 Bridge, JRPS hopes to expand access to the Park for a more diverse audience to explore and engage in the outdoors, whether it's their first or thousandth time visiting.

The UDC application team (FOJRP, JRPS, and Marvel) believes that the NEA project facilitates an opportunity for Richmond's children and their parents to encounter adventure, creating future stewards of the James River Park System.

Community outreach

The James River Park Masterplan (2019) was a comprehensive community outreach effort that states priorities for the rehabilitation of historic structures, the conservation of natural areas, and the provision of recreational amenities in JRPS. The Masterplan established Belle Isle as a location that experiences heavy public use. It describes the island as a transitional space from the parks' western natural areas to its eastern industrial and urbanized location. The Masterplan advocates for further interpretation of Belle Isle's historic places, which is consistent with the goals of JRPS staff.

The Belle Isle NEA has been presented to Friends of James River Park, the Falls of the James Scenic River Advisory Committee, and the Capital Region Land Conservancy. A public open house was held on Thursday, April 18th to gather community input. A detailed record of public comment can be found at the end of this narrative.

Project budget

True Timber, a local arborist company, is working with Marvel, FOJRP, and JRPS to develop the NEA with a budget of \$100,000. In-kind labor, select trees and shrubs, and site work will be provided by JRPS staff and volunteers, at a value of approximately \$30,000.

Project funding sources

Funding for the NEA will be provided through the support of Friends of James River Park System. The Robins Foundation, a local leader in charitable giving, has committed to providing \$100,000 in Belle Isle project funds.

Construction program and estimated construction start date

The construction program is currently being developed by True Timber in collaboration with Marvel and JRPS staff. Materials will be collected from JRPS and repurposed within the park. The estimated start date is January 15, 2025.