

## Mayo Island Natural Area Final Design Application

City of Richmond Department of Parks, Recreation & Community Facilities  
and Department of Public Utilities

Engineering Consultant: TYLin

Design Consultant: Marvel

### **Project Narrative**

#### ***Project Purpose***

The 2023 acquisition of the roughly 16-acre site known as Mayo Island, which is positioned at the crux of the falls and the tidal portion of the James River in Richmond, is a milestone in the expansion of the James River Park System, a beloved and storied natural area that welcomes about 2 million visitors annually to delight in the city's riverfront. Long identified as an objective by community members, park advocates, public servants, and City leaders, the addition of Mayo Island as a public green space for Richmond residents and visitors has been identified in adopted public documents including Richmond 300, the Richmond Riverfront Plan, the Downtown Masterplan, and the James River Park System Masterplan. The purpose of the Mayo Island Natural Area Final Design application is to describe the phased efforts that will culminate in the opening of Mayo Island Natural Area in Fall of 2026, the deadline required by state grant administrators and the timing necessary to facilitate the reconstruction of the Mayo Bridge.

The phases of the Mayo Island Natural Area project described in the application include (1) demolition, (2) grading and stabilization, and (3) restoration and natural area development. Each of these phases is influenced by important factors. These include the requirements of the Community Flood Preparedness Fund (CFPF), a grant administered by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, which requires that the park design achieve a no-rise certification to satisfy FEMA requirements. Once complete, the 16-acre green space must not inhibit floodwaters more than today's Mayo Island. The CFPF grant also establishes the timeline for the City to have made "substantial progress" toward park creation in December 2025 and for Mayo Island Natural Area to open to the public in October of 2026. Having successfully met the terms of the CFPF grant, the City of Richmond will recoup \$7.5 million through the CFPF program and \$1.5 million through the Virginia Community Land Fund (VCLF). Meeting this natural area development timeframe will make the City eligible for future State restoration funding.

In addition to the CFPF grant requirements, Mayo Island will be protected by a conservation easement jointly held by Capital Region Land Conservancy and DCR, in the same manner as James River Park System. Once established, the Mayo Island easement will cover 14.5 acres of the island and establish restrictions on the construction of new structures, protections for a 100-foot riparian area, and establish a percentage of maximum impervious coverage allowable on Mayo Island Natural Area. The planned phases of site demolition, stabilization, and restoration reflected in this application will be captured in the easement document, which will permit the progressing removal of structures and impervious surface as the site becomes a natural area and functional ecosystem.

Coordination related to the planned construction of the Mayo Island Bridge, which will impact Mayo Island Natural Area's downriver or eastern side, is underway. The City of Richmond Department of Public Works and VDOT are working with project applicants to ensure each project meets FEMA requirements, and to permit safe and comfortable access to Mayo Island Natural Area for cyclist and pedestrians, anglers, and motorists, in addition to providing emergency vehicle access to bridge and the island locations. Richmond's historic Slave Trail, and predicted increase in visitor numbers, will be further described in Mayo Bridge conceptual design package, which is currently scheduled for the summer of 2025.

The overarching goal shared by Richmond's James River Park and riverfront plans, CFPF grant, the forthcoming Mayo Island Conservation Easement, and the collective responses gathered in two community engagement events since Mayo's purchase is to redevelop Mayo Island as a flood-resilient naturalized public landscape. The island will provide, as City planner and historian Tyler Potterfield wrote in *Nonesuch Place*, a much needed "breathing space" to residents of Shockoe

Bottom to the north and Manchester to the south, in addition to visitors who are projected to visit from less adjacent neighborhoods and regions. Richmond's Belle Isle sees about 173,000 visitors annually. Given Mayo Island Natural Area's planned bike, pedestrian, and vehicle access, proposed parking area, and its recreation significance for paddlers and anglers, it is anticipated that Mayo Island's future visitor numbers will far surpass Belle Isle's.

### ***Background and Context***

The excerpt below from the Richmond Riverfront Plan describes historic background and site context for Mayo Island .

Mayo's Island (*page 66*)

#### **"CENTRAL RIVERFRONT PARK" 16 ACRES**

Mayo's Island sits at the center of the Richmond Riverfront, positioned mid-river and bisected by Mayo Bridge, that connects it to the north and south banks. The island itself has incrementally grown in all dimensions, the result of man-made additions and flood effects that transformed the island from riparian land to recreational and eventually industrial use. The 1890 F.W. Beers map identifies the island as "Island Park," with recreational use that continued into the 20th century, before the impact of severe flood events.

Mayo's Island is strategically located to serve communities on both the north and south sides of the [James] River as a premier regional public open space. Mayo's Island is both the largest and most vehicular-accessible of all the islands; additionally, it is adjacent to the habitat-rich archipelago of smaller islands immediately upriver. The island should be acquired for public use as open space, consistent with recommendations in the 2009 Downtown Master Plan, that envisioned Mayo's Island as the centerpiece of the Riverfront. The island could provide a distinct open space that provides walking and biking trails, multiple watercraft launches, an exploratory green landscape, play areas, an event lawn, and restored riparian overlooks upriver and downriver...

The rehabilitation of Mayo Bridge should integrate with this anticipated revitalization of Mayo's Island, in support of this anticipated active, pedestrian landscape. The Plan recommends that 14th Street as it crosses the island be reconfigured to calm traffic speed and accommodate the anticipated foot and bike traffic crossing the street from one side of the island to the other. The acquisition and transformation of Mayo's Island into public open space is a priority for protecting the integrity of the James River as an accessible landscape, reflective of Richmond's rich natural and cultural legacy: Mayo's Island becomes the 'green jewel' of the Richmond Riverfront.

[Former] uses include surface parking rental, recycling transfer, and artist loft rental. The majority of the site is paved with impervious concrete and asphalt. Future development of this privately-owned island is constrained by three significant factors: flooding, infrastructure, and utilities. The general topographic elevation of the island is lower than the 100-year flood, making redevelopment extremely difficult from a regulatory standpoint. Historically, the island has endured multiple catastrophic floods resulting in immersion and the total loss of various structures. Additionally, the 1994 floodwall on either bank of the James is likely to amplify the flooding impact at Mayo's Island; the former wide breadth of the river at this location is now constrained between two floodwalls, concentrating floodwaters...

The absence of any detectable link to the City sanitary sewer system is the third constraint. Written records and site investigations have shown no evidence of a functioning sanitary sewer system; therefore island structures do not currently conform to regulatory health and building codes. The cost of addressing all three constraints, particularly the implied public funding of significant infrastructure improvements to solve the constraints, leads the City to focus on acquisition rather than private development."

Facilitated by the Stoney Administration and with support from the Capital Region Land Conservancy, the City of Richmond successfully acquired the 16-acre island in January of 2023 and initiated the process of planning its development as a public open space which will be protected by a conservation easement in perpetuity.

### ***Community outreach***

Since the purchase of Mayo Island in January of 2023, the City of Richmond has held two community engagement events hosted jointly by the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Facilities and the Department of Public Utilities and facilitated by design and engineering consultants Marvel and TYLin.

In October of 2024, project partners held a two-hour open house at Studio Two Three, located in Manchester neighborhood, where over 100 visitors provided more than 400 comments related to what they would like to see at Mayo Island. Comments included a desire for safe access to the island for cyclists and walkers, including visitors to the Slave Trail, as well as a desire for downtown views, boater access, natural spaces, and places safe for families and children to recreate. The significance of Mayo Bridge to Richmond's anglers was broadly recognized and expanded fishing access was requested, in addition to places to picnic and learn about the history of Mayo Island through interpretive signage. Many participants in the event provided positive feedback to facilitators related to the conversion of the former industrial and commercial site to a natural public space and called out the need for shade and heat resilience in the planning and design.

The project team held a second community engagement open house in Downtown Richmond on March 5, 2025 at Marvel offices. Public attendance was again over 100, demonstrating the community's interest in Mayo Island Natural Area design and development. This open house provided an opportunity for the public to learn about the proposed rehabilitation of Mayo Island landscape, through the phased process of asphalt removal and demolition, excavation of fill, and the cultivation of pollinators, cover crops, and phyto-remediating flowering plants to begin to restore the health of Mayo Island's ecosystem. The project timeline, estimating the opening of the natural area in late 2026, was shared by Parks, Recreation & Community Facilities Director Chris Frelke.

Throughout the Mayo Island Natural Area design development process, which began in 2023, the City has maintained an online survey to garner input from residents and visitors who may have been unable to attend public engagement events. To date, the survey has garnered 320 responses. Of these, 80% rank "Safe pedestrian connections to neighborhoods" as very important; 78% percent ranked "Restoring natural resources" as very important. Trails, views of the James River, Shaded and heat resilient locations, and Paddler Access were other features that the public valued highly.

### ***Copies of distributed materials***

Please see the attached presentation documents used in Mayo Island community engagement, including Mayo Island presentation boards (previously submitted for concept review) and the City of Richmond online survey for Mayo Island community input, which can be found at <https://forms.gle/pBYGzhnsDeyyDbYi6>.

### ***Project budget***

The full project budget is to be determined following the development of complete demolition and construction plans. The estimated budget for the three-phase project is \$16 million. Demolition of the office building located at 501 S 14<sup>th</sup> Street and the Mayo Island warehouse also located on the east side of the island, and of approximately 7 acres of vacant parking lot throughout the property (which includes the removal of 12" of fill below the existing asphalt and some electric utilities) is predicted to be the most significant project cost. The stabilization and rehabilitation of Mayo Island Natural Area features wide swaths of planted meadow, established by seed mixes that create seasonal interest while restoring a more functional ecosystem. Pollinating and phytoremediating plants and a network of paths, in addition to furnishings, will also factor into the stabilization budget and final project phase. A detailed budget will be provided in the final application.

### ***Project funding sources***

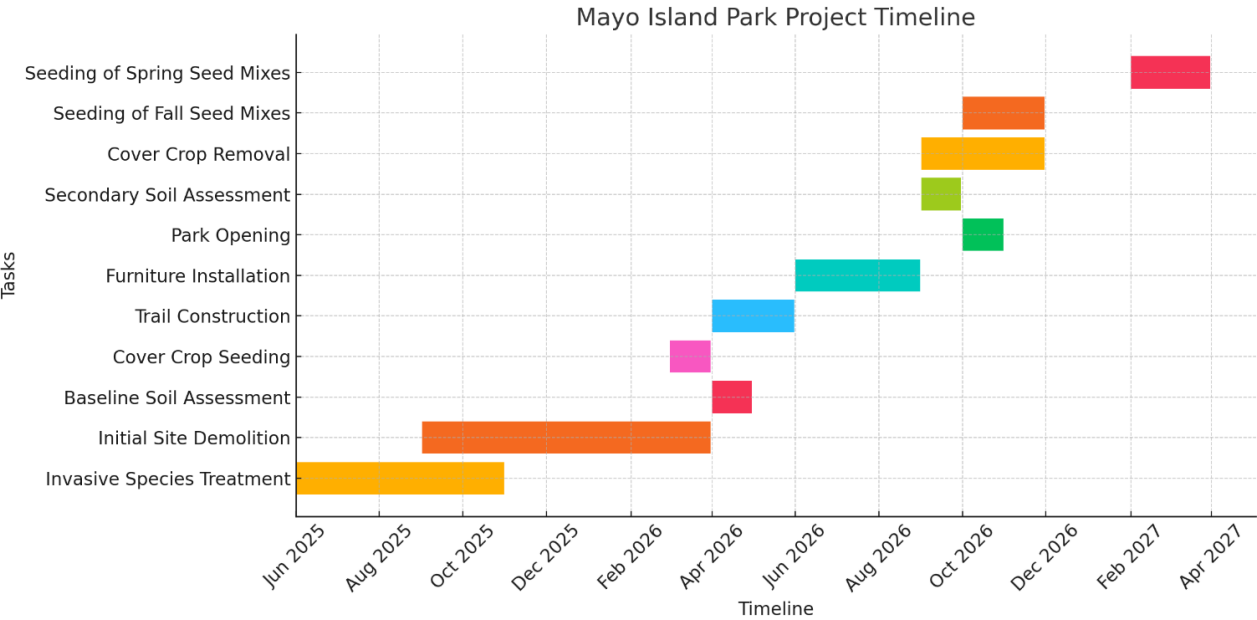
The proposed City of Richmond Fiscal Year 2026 Capital Improvement Plan budget includes \$16 million for the redevelopment of Mayo Island as a flood-resilient, public natural area.

**Project Timeline**

Through the Summer and Fall of 2025, the James River Park System Invasive Species Management team will begin by treating invasive plants around the natural area perimeter using the ‘hack-and-squirt’ method. In early 2026, following contractor selection, the transformation of Mayo Island will begin with the demolition of existing asphalt and buildings and grading. Once demolition and grading are complete, the site will be seeded with an Annual Cover Crop Mix (ERNMX-135) to stabilize the soil.

In Spring 2026, Capital Trees will perform a baseline soil assessment to evaluate phytoremediation progress. Around the same time, the James River Park System Trail Crew will begin constructing trails, a process expected to take approximately two months. Furniture will be installed along the trail corridors.

By Fall 2026, Capital Trees will conduct a second soil assessment. JRPS staff will then remove the initial cover crop. JRPS ISM and Capital Trees will reseed the area with a permanent seed mix in Fall 2026. The park is scheduled to open to the public in October 2026, offering accessible green space and trails. A second seeding will occur in Spring 2027 to support long-term plant establishment.



In 2027, construction of the Mayo Bridge is expected to begin, improving connectivity to the island. Following the bridge’s completion, the City plans to continue enhancing the park over time, as funding allows.

**Park Maintenance**

James River Park System staff will handle routine park maintenance, including mowing, meadow bush-hogging, trash collection, trail upkeep, tree care, and repairs to park furniture and amenities. The James River Park System Invasive Species Management team will oversee meadow inspections, apply herbicide to control invasive species, and assist with reseeding. Capital Trees will care for landscaped islands and border plantings and will also support meadow inspections and reseeding efforts.