

Whitcomb Community Park

Final Review: Urban Design Committee

- *Amendment to Approved Conceptual Master Plan*

- *Final Phase 1 Site Plan*

June 6, 2024 (Revised)

Project Purpose:

The Whitcomb Community Park project will enhance existing park features and improve access to recreational resources consistent with the goals of the Richmond 300 Master Plan to create Thriving Environments and High-Quality Places. Through on-site meetings and a virtual meeting, the community has had the opportunity to engage in the planning and design process.

Project Context:

Whitcomb Community Park is located in Richmond's East End adjacent to Whitcomb Court, with its Community Center located at the northeast corner of the site. The park was formerly the location of the Whitcomb Court Elementary School, which sat at the center of the current walking loop. To the east is a brownfield parcel on top of a former landfill. This proximity has impacted the site's soils, which must be considered in the design of park amenities.

Current recreational facilities comprise of one football/soccer field, a basketball court, and a walking loop. Newer tables and seating have been placed in the grass adjacent to the sidewalk on Sussex Street. The southern portion of the property has several low areas that experience poor drainage and standing water.

Original Conceptual Master Plan Through Community-Driven Design:

In Fall 2022 the original master plan effort was led by Storefront for Community Design (SFCD), a nonprofit design center in Richmond, and Hanbury, an architecture firm. Prior to the conceptual plan development, PRCF, SFCD, and other stakeholders engaged the Whitcomb Court community through surveys and stakeholder meetings to receive feedback to develop the preliminary plan.

Revised Conceptual Master Plan and Phase 1 Site Plan

The original master plan was revised by Timmons Group to improve spatial relationships and adjacencies between planned amenities. Food truck parking, anticipated to be an occasional use, does not require dedicated parking, and can be accommodated on the new basketball courts in closer proximity to the community center. A community garden generally requires

some parking to accommodate the delivery of materials such as compost and mulch, and thus was not ideal to be located at the center of the park surrounded by hardscaping and amenities with no access route for vehicles. The food truck plaza was thus re-envisioned to be parking for a relocated community garden. Playgrounds and splash pads benefit from close proximity to bathrooms, so were moved closer to the community center. Though locations have changed, all amenities and proposed uses in the original master plan have been maintained and are included in the revised plan.

Phase 1 of the proposed site master plan will:

- Create a continuous walking loop that connects existing and proposed amenities
- Construct two (2) basketball courts in a more centralized and accessible location to replace a deteriorated basketball court; these courts will also serve as a location for community events, food truck parking, resource fairs, etc.
- Construct a pedestrian promenade on the eastern edge of the park on Sussex Street with hardscaped areas for existing site furnishings to be reused
- Provide a new stormwater management system with landscaping
- Install new landscaping to include a meadow and shade and flowering trees along the walking loop

Future phases of the master plan will interweave with Phase 1 elements to create a vibrant multiuse civic space, with site programming and amenities including:

- A central open lawn anchored by a picnic/events shelter
- A playground with play mounds, splash pad, and shade structures
- A community garden with off-street parking and grilling pavilion

Site Concerns:

The existing amenities are limited and in disrepair. Safety and sight lines are major concerns. The basketball court is not on an accessible route (it is located at the bottom of a short staircase), and community center staff cannot supervise the basketball court in its current location due to a lack of windows on the rear of the building. Sussex Street is overly wide and cars speed along the road. Users expressed a desire for some physical separation such as landscaping between Sussex Street and park amenities.

The adjacent brownfield and past use as a landfill pose challenges to the development of the site. Soil tests within the park found soil contamination and high methane concentrations; however, these contaminants are located more than 5 feet below the surface. The stormwater basin will need to be capped with a clay liner to prevent intercepted rainwater from being contaminated by groundwater. Enclosed spaces that may be necessary to achieve some future site amenities, such as vaults for splash pad valves and controls, will need to be designed in consideration of the existing soils to prevent the buildup of explosive gases.

While there are several feet of clean fill above the soil contamination, best practices for the community garden would be to install raised beds to discourage digging and disruption of the site's soils. The native meadow planting has been located adjacent to the brownfield to provide a phytoremediation (plant-based soil contaminant remediation) benefit. The deep, dense, and fibrous root systems of native meadow grasses have been demonstrated to degrade certain types of soil contaminants that may be leeching from the adjacent brownfield.

Project Budget and Funding Sources:

The City of Richmond has approximately \$1.2 million from CIP funds allocated for Phase 1 construction. Additional funding for future phases is anticipated through a combination of CIP funds and local, state, and/or federal grant opportunities that are currently being considered, including a grant through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) for stormwater improvements. Carmax has committed the funding for the construction of the basketball courts in phase 1.

If grant funding from NFWF is awarded, PRCF and the project team will pursue phase 2 of the project. Phase 2 will include the splash pad, playground, and community garden.

A preliminary Phase 1 engineering cost estimate suggests the full \$1.2 million will be necessary to complete improvements depicted in phase 1 graphics.

Construction Timeline:

Phase 1 improvements are expected to include the basketball courts, stormwater basin, and walking loop. Construction is anticipated to begin in Spring 2025 with a 5-6-month construction timeline anticipated. A more detailed breakdown of the design and permitting schedule is below:

| Task/Process | Target Completion Date |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Community Engagement and Conceptual Design (SFCD Master Plan) | Fall 2022 |
| Survey, Environmental, and Utility Location | December 2023 – January 2024 |
| Master Planning, Schematic Design, and Design Development | February - May 2024 |
| Urban Design Committee Final Review and Approval | June 2024 |
| Construction Documents and Permit Drawings | June - September 2024 |
| Permitting; Procurement, Bidding, Contractor Award | September - October 2024 |
| Construction | Spring 2025 |