

## A New Vision for FDR Park Highlights of the Master Plan May 22, 2019



In 1914, Philadelphia’s city planners had a vision to carve out a park from the low-lying tidal marshes in South Philadelphia. This site, now known as FDR Park, is the result of a design by the Olmsted Brothers to create a new recreational landscape using earth excavated from the Broad Street Subway construction. That work transformed Hollander Creek into a network of picturesque lakes with adjacent lawns connected by a network of carriage and foot paths. In 1926, the park hosted the national Sesquicentennial Exhibition and several grand civic buildings, including the iconic Boathouse, opened for the first time.

The 348-acre FDR Park has not seen transformative investment since a golf course was added in the 1930s. Today, as South Philadelphia’s population grows and recreation trends change, this historic park needs to be reimagined in order to fulfill its promise as a critical piece of civic, public health, and ecological infrastructure.



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With financial support from the Friends of FDR Park, Councilman Kenyatta Johnson's office and the William Penn Foundation, Fairmount Park Conservancy and Philadelphia Parks & Recreation engaged the planning and design firm WRT to develop a master plan that would return South Philadelphia's only large park to its original intent as an urban oasis. WRT's charge was to create a sustainable vision for FDR Park that inspires investment, meets the needs of Philadelphians today and tomorrow, and focuses on resiliency in the face of a changing climate.

On May 22, 2019, the WRT team unveiled the Master Plan for FDR Park at a community event held on the Boathouse Lawn. This document summarizes the planning process and highlights the proposed elements of a redesigned space. The full text of the report will be available this summer.

## **FDR Park Today**

Today, FDR Park sits within some of Philadelphia's most diverse and fast-growing communities. While the historic plan successfully created a beloved destination for multiple generations of Philadelphians, the park today struggles with underfunding, deferred maintenance of historic assets and infrastructure, and frequent flooding. The park includes an 18-hole golf course, baseball and softball fields, tennis courts, and a playground. The space is also used for a parking concession during major events in the stadium district to generate revenue for the ongoing maintenance of the site. This complex mix of uses along with the park's increasing popularity has created new challenges and opportunities.

Today's challenges at FDR Park include:

- FDR Park is divided in half, with nearly 180 acres (which include a public golf course), behind a fence.
- Park infrastructure, including water, sewer, and electric lines, are nearly 100 years old, dating back to temporary installation for the Sesquicentennial.
- The park's tide gate, located in the Navy Yard Reserve Basin, no longer functions properly, creating drainage challenges on the site.
- The area experiences a massive incursion of untreated stormwater from I-95, Broad Street, and areas north of Pattison Ave. that impairs the water quality in the lakes and creeks and damages park infrastructure.
- Historic structures like the Guardhouse and Bath Houses have been closed to the public due to lack of funds for ongoing maintenance and activation.



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- As the region's weather has become hotter and wetter, the park will continue to experience frequent flooding.
- Visitors are challenged by a lack of services, such as restrooms, seating, water fountains, and food and drink opportunities that would make longer visits to the park possible.
- Competing needs occur among park users when the parking concession operates during major events.

While FDR Park faces challenges, the opportunities at this site are unlike any other park in the region:

- FDR Park is the only large-scale park in the city with a direct connection to the subway line.
- FDR Park is the only estuary park in Philadelphia, creating the opportunity for a marsh landscape and diversity of species.
- FDR Park is designated as an important bird area, and is one of the top three hot spots for the number of species found onsite in Philadelphia.
- The park is the city's most permitted site for picnics and events from users across the region, reflecting its popularity and importance to residents.

## **The Planning Process**

During the year-long planning process, the project team spoke to nearly 3,000 community members and stakeholders. These conversations took place in seven languages and in settings that ranged from online surveys, canvassing in the park, two public open houses, several small design workshops, and more than 30 stakeholder meetings. The project team learned that FDR Park is a critical green oasis in one of South Philadelphia's most densely populated neighborhoods. Philadelphians look to the park when they want to celebrate life through picnics and special events. They value opportunities to connect with nature and to enjoy safe walking and biking trails.

The public engagement process was accompanied by an equally robust study of the site's hydrology. This study involved carefully developing an understanding of how stormwater moves onto the site and which portions of the park may experience flooding caused by high groundwater. By aligning community priorities with the realities of a changing climate and a low-lying park, the planning process was oriented toward finding the balance of activity, nature and water.



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We learned there were many things that the community would like to see changed about FDR Park:

- Establish new amenities and services that would allow families to extend their stay at the park.
- Resolve the conflicts between vehicles and park users for the benefit of both.
- Improve opportunities for multi-generational users to enjoy the park, with improved playgrounds.
- Create an operations and revenue infrastructure that allows for the park to be well-cared for and maintained.

At the same time, there were many things about FDR Park that residents appreciated and wanted to see preserved:

- Preserve and enhance opportunities to connect with nature and water.
- Continue and expand opportunities for youth development through athletics and environmental education.
- Celebrate the historic core and civic architecture of the park.
- Enhance the identity of the lakes and keep the Boathouse at the heart of the FDR experience.



## A Resilient Vision for a Historic Park



The FDR Park Master Plan offers a once-in-a generation opportunity to reimagine a historic Olmsted Park to serve 21st century Philadelphians. Just as park visitors experienced a remarkable feat of landscape architecture and civil engineering during the Sesquicentennial, future users will come to know FDR Park as Philadelphia's centerpiece of recreation, art, ecology and design. FDR Park has always been a product of human invention and imagination and it will continue to be in this resilient vision for the historic park.

In order to achieve this vision, we must bring nature, water, and human activity into balance in one unified system. The master plan is organized into two distinct zones: an *Ecological Core* that manages water, connects parks users to nature, and provides critical habitat; and an *Urban Edge*, where new amenities such as state-of-the-art athletic fields and signature playgrounds attract visitors from across the street and across the country.

Within the *Ecological Core* there are four key zones connected by a rich network of trails, water access, and unique varieties of plants and animals.



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- **The Lakes:** Olmsted's historic lakes function as the ecological heart and the local identity of the park. The master plan celebrates the lakes with elevated boardwalks, a new wooded picnic grove, and access points for fishing and paddling.
- **The Wetland:** In partnership with the Philadelphia International Airport, a new tidal wetland is restored on 40 acres on the southwestern border of the site. This new wetland provides important wildlife habitat and delivers on the number one priority of the community: access to trails and nature.
- **The Marsh:** Shedbrook Creek is expanded, restored and widened. It becomes a shady corridor connecting areas of active recreation and play on the western half of the park. The creek also offers a public access point, inviting Philadelphians to explore this little-known waterway by kayak or canoe for the first time in the park's history.
- **The Hill:** Using soil excavated from the Wetlands and the Marsh, the Hill rises 36 feet above FDR park, giving visitors stunning views of the park, the Philadelphia skyline, and the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers. The Hill changes with the seasons, offering sledding in the winter, panoramas of autumn color, and meadow wildflowers in spring and summer – plus an exhilarating climb and extra-long slide year-round.

With a connected and contiguous *Ecological Core* to hold and store stormwater and provide habitat, the *Urban Edge* can be raised out of the floodplain, allowing for investments that transform the perimeter of FDR Park. In the *Urban Edge*, athletic fields, basketball and tennis courts, and playgrounds are tied together by a 5k multi-use trail and frequent spots to picnic, purchase refreshments, and play.

- **The Gateway:** The park is connected to regional trail and transportation networks, including I-95, the Broad Street Line, and the Schuylkill River Trail. The Gateway creates a powerful presence for the park with a new pedestrian plaza on the corner of Broad and Pattison. The historic Guardhouse acts as Welcome Center for the park, providing a central hub for concessions, rentals, and information about the park. An exciting signature playground celebrating the park's unique identity is tucked into the grove next to the Welcome Center.
- **The Great Lawn:** Returning to the original vision of the Olmsted Plan, the master plan creates a great lawn where neighbors can gather informally for picnics and play or come together for exciting celebrations and events.
- **The Fields:** Excavated soil from the Wetlands is used to create three clusters of state-of-the-art athletic fields, all elevated out of the floodplain and



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- equipped with lighting and synthetic field surfaces that maximize playtime and reduce maintenance needs. Twelve multi-sport fields and several tennis and basketball courts are complemented with concessions, trails, and a second signature play space ensuring that multiple generations of park users can enjoy the space simultaneously. Basketball courts are added to FDR Park for the first time ever.
- **Franklin 5k:** Looping throughout the park is a 5k (roughly 3.1 mile) multi-use trail that connects visitors with the diverse range of experiences available at FDR Park. From the Gateway Plaza, around the Boathouse, through the Fields and up the Great Lawn, the Franklin 5k creates a safe and picturesque experience for walkers, runners, and cyclists. It also becomes an iconic location for 5k runs, which culminate in celebrations on the Great Lawn.

This ambitious and achievable vision relies on an understanding of the park as an artificial landscape, where topography, water, and nature are designed to create Philadelphia's centerpiece of resilience, community, and celebration. The master plan positions FDR Park as a critical piece of civic, health, and ecological infrastructure that sustains and serves all Philadelphians. In the tradition of Olmsted, the plan inspires a new relationship between the city and nature for the benefit of both.

## Next Steps

The capital cost of implementing the Master Plan for FDR Park is projected to be upwards of \$200 million. Just as the cost of developing the plan was covered by a mix of public and private funds, implementing the plan will require public-private partnerships. **Fairmount Park Conservancy** expects to assemble funding from local, state, and federal agencies with additional investment from philanthropic and corporate partners. The goal of this investment is to create a self-sustaining public space that is owned and managed by the city and generates revenue from on-site concessions and events to operate and maintain the park. Investments and improvements will be implemented in phases over several years.

At the launch event, **Philadelphia Parks & Recreation** announced that funds have been allocated to jump-start investments by repaving the park road and repairing the roof on the Guardhouse. William Penn Foundation is underwriting a pilot for a dedicated park manager to work collaboratively with partners to care for and



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program the park in new, engaging ways. In addition, the Philadelphia International Airport announced its commitment to help implement the first phase of work, a 40-acre mitigation wetland that will provide important wildlife habitat and access to nature.

The FDR Park of the future is flexible and functional. Its resilience is grounded in a community-led process that strikes a balance between nature, water, and human activity.

Learn more about the Master Plan for FDR Park and view additional renderings at: <http://myphillypark.org/fdr-park>

**Fairmount Park Conservancy** exists to champion Philadelphia's parks. We lead capital projects and historic preservation efforts, foster neighborhood park stewardship, attract and leverage investments, and develop innovative programs throughout the 10,200 acres that include Fairmount Park and more than 100 neighborhood parks around the city. For more information, please visit [myphillypark.org](http://myphillypark.org), join us at [facebook.com/fairmountparkconservancy](https://facebook.com/fairmountparkconservancy), and follow us on Instagram and Twitter @myphillypark.

**Philadelphia Parks & Recreation** (PPR) advances the prosperity of the city and the progress of her people through intentional and sustained stewardship of nearly 10,200 acres of public land and waterways as well as through hundreds of safe, stimulating recreation, environmental and cultural centers. PPR promotes the well-being and growth of the city's residents by connecting them to the natural world around them, to each other and to fun, physical and social opportunities. PPR is responsible for the upkeep of historically significant Philadelphia events and specialty venues, and works collaboratively with communities and organizations in leading capital projects and the introduction of inventive programming. To learn more about Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, visit us at [www.phila.gov/parksandrec](http://www.phila.gov/parksandrec), and follow @philaparkandrec on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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