

ACCESSIBILITY AND REHABILITATION PLAN

NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND

NEWTON, MASSACHUSETTS

NEWTON PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT



WALKER-KLUESING DESIGN GROUP

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Cover image from 1909 City of Newton Public Documents [Annual Report]

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Sledding, December 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Newton Centre Playground is a 17.9 acre historic park centrally located in the community. It has served as a central gathering point for both active and passive recreation, formal civic functions and as an informal meeting place for citizens year round for over 110 years.

Created as a result of civic interest and involvement, Newton Centre Playground was conceived of as both a playground and a park. The intent was to serve a broad audience by balancing the activities of a playground with the calming qualities of a park. It was the first playground in the city and one of the earliest in the nation. The initial design was prepared by the firm of Frederick Law Olmsted & Co. in 1890.

PURPOSE AND GOALS

The purpose of this study is to develop an accessibility and rehabilitation plan and implementation plan for the entire playground that can be used as a guide for both long and short term planning and improvements.

General goals include making the playground accessible, rehabilitation of this historic resource in a contemporary context, reinforcement of an overall image that is compatible with the historic background of this playground, and increasing passive recreation opportunities while maintaining the active recreation components.

METHODOLOGY

The study began with on site investigations and a review of available historic and current materials found in the files of the Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Newton Parks and Recreation Department, Newton Public Library and Newton Historical Society. Correspondence files of the Olmsted firm at the Library of Congress were not examined, although not for lack of effort. Files at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities [SPNEA] and other repositories of historic information were also not examined. The Massachusetts Historic Commission has not been contacted in regard to records of any archaeological investigations that may have taken place in the playground. Public meetings were held to develop and refine the concepts presented here.

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ORGANIZATION OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document is organized for easy reference by the Newton Parks and Recreation Department and others who may participate in completing components of the rehabilitation, restoration, preservation and maintenance efforts.

General information is presented first with some historic background on the development and evolution of Newton Centre Playground. This is followed by a site specific overall plan for the playground including an assessment of existing conditions and specific recommendations. It includes general recommendations for the rehabilitation of historic and other components, prioritized cost estimates for work in the playground, and administrative and maintenance management issues and recommendations. The appendix contains a chronology of the playground, a list of Olmsted firm correspondence related to the playground, a list of available drawings and a selected bibliography for further reading.

LANDSCAPE PRESERVATION STANDARDS

The 1996 Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes* addresses four treatments: preservation; rehabilitation; restoration; and reconstruction. "Of the four, Preservation standards require retention of the greatest amount of historic fabric, including the landscape's historic form, features and details as they evolved over time. Rehabilitation standards acknowledge the need to alter or add to a cultural landscape to meet continuing or new uses while retaining the landscape's historic character. Restoration standards allow for the depiction of a landscape at a particular time in its history by preserving materials from the period of significance and removing materials from other periods. Reconstruction standards establish a framework for recreating a vanished or non-surviving landscape with new materials, primarily for interpretive purposes."

This property is historically significant for a number of reasons. It should be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, although no such attempt has been made to date.

Given the historic nature of the property, the overall treatment goal for the site is rehabilitation. This is the only appropriate treatment because current conditions require acceptance of nonconforming activities.

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Newton Centre Playground is a significant historic public landscape that expresses the design vision of the Olmsted firm. In a relatively small space it exemplifies the important qualities of a larger Olmsted park. The basic historic structure of the park is intact although much of the detail is missing.

Overall Concept

The primary goal is to recreate the image of Newton Centre Playground in accordance with that envisioned by the Olmsted firm in 1890 and 1891, and as later modified by Herbert Kellaway, while adapting selected areas to accommodate existing and proposed changed needs and conditions using design principles established for the park at that time. Newton Centre Playground was Newton's first playground and is still considered by many as Newton's most important character defining public open space. It created a strong sense of civic pride in the center of the city that remains today. The intent of the plan is to rehabilitate the playground, thereby restoring the central character of the community.

The following summary includes the most significant recommendations for achieving that goal.



Accessibility and Rehabilitation Plan
NEWTON CENTRE PLAYGROUND
City of Newton Parks and Recreation Department
Newton, Massachusetts

Walker-Klusing Design Group
Bellata 3 Design
Judith Nitsch Engineering, Inc.
May 2008
Scale: 1" = 40'

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Access, Circulation and Parking

Vehicular Access and Circulation: Provide 12' minimum paved width emergency/service vehicle routes to provide access to each of the major recreation facilities in the playground. Maintain the Centre Street entrance for emergency/service vehicular use and restrict vehicular access into the playground from other points. Maintain service access to Mason-Rice School from Tyler Terrace.

Parking: Continue to make use of on street parking without providing parking facilities inside the playground. Utilize the Mason-Rice School parking lot to provide additional parking for the playground. Designate on street handicap parking with 2 spaces each at Homer Street, Bowen Street and Tyler Terrace.

Pedestrian Access and Circulation: Provide a complete interconnected pedestrian circulation system serving playground entrances and recreation facilities. Assist in completing links to other areas and trails outside the playground. Walks should retain a generous width, 6' minimum, as is appropriate from a historic and use perspective. At the Recreation Center, repair the stepped ramp on the east side of the building and remove the steps and path below.

Universal Access: Make Newton Centre Playground [path routes and surfaces, and recreation facilities] universally accessible as is required for compliance with state and federal regulations.

Pavement Materials: Use bituminous concrete for walks and drives inside the playground. This will reduce the ongoing maintenance requirements associated with gravel or crushed stone. Add a chip seal material over the bituminous concrete when funds allow. This treatment will provide a rustic historic appearance. This recommendation is made with the understanding that the city does not plow these walks free of snow because that activity would impair the appearance of chip seal. Maintain drives that are snow plowed in bituminous concrete.

Recreation Facilities

Tennis Courts: Maintain the existing courts. Replace the surrounding fence, practice court and backboard. The latter should have sound attenuating qualities to reduce the acoustic impact on neighbors. Lighting is not recommended because of the proximity to adjacent homes.

Basketball Court: Maintain the court as long as neighborhood use continues. Repair the court surface. Remove the lights.

Baseball and Soccer Fields: These facilities are well used and in excellent condition. No immediate recommendations are offered. Local Little League officials are currently satisfied with their field even though it is undersized.

Play Structure Area: This facility is scheduled for replacement in place in 2006 with private contributions. This new facility is to meet current ADA guidelines.

School Garden: Maintain the school garden at Mason-Rice School.

Archery: Do not replace archery facilities.

Toboggan Slide and Winter Sports: Maintain the existing sledding slopes, but do not replace the toboggan slide. Continue to provide temporary safety features at the bottom of slope to prevent accidents in the brook.

Buildings

Make the Recreation Center accessible. Defer accessibility improvements to the building until appropriate improvements are made inside the Recreation Center. Continue to provide periodic maintenance to the Recreation Center. No additional buildings should be added to the playground.

Public Safety and Vandalism

Vegetative management along the brooks and additional lighting in the playground is recommended to improve overall visibility, increase the perception of safety, help facilitate observation by police patrol and reduce vandalism. Increased police presence and enforcement is critical to change inappropriate activities and perceptions about the park.

Site Furnishings

Benches: Provide more benches throughout the playground, particularly in relation to passive recreation areas. Consideration should be given to selecting a city wide style of bench for Newton's historic parks to ease long term maintenance requirements for the city. As the existing benches of other styles deteriorate, they should be replaced.

Trash Receptacles: Provide these facilities to satisfy current public expectations. Receptacles should ideally be visually compatible with the character of other amenities in this historic open space.

Drinking Fountains: Replace existing drinking fountains with a universally accessible model that is visually compatible with the historic character of the playground.

Signs: Provide a new overall sign program consisting of identification, regulatory, orientation and interpretive signs to present a sense of uniformity and wholeness. The system should be designed to reflect the historic quality of the playground. Consideration should be given to developing a system that is appropriate for all of the historic parks in the city.

A new system of consistent and appropriate signs is recommended. Signs should be legible and visually compatible with the character of the grounds and an overall system to present a sense of uniformity and wholeness. The placement of signs inside the grounds should be coordinated with drive and path systems so that visitors naturally remain on path surfaces and are not attracted to walk on lawn surfaces.

Visible identification signs are needed, particularly at pedestrian entrances. The identification sign should provide some basic information like the date of establishment, at a minimum. Regulatory signs enumerating rules and regulations are critical to help resolve and control issues related to use. The placement of a supporting informational or interpretive sign system component is also recommended and would be very beneficial in assisting visitors understand the significance of this resource.

Memorials

There are no recommendations for existing memorials at this time. Recommendations pertaining to the issue of monuments, memorials and commemorative markers in the playground are included under Maintenance/Management.

Landscape Character

The landscape character that was envisioned by the Olmsted firm and others should be developed as much as possible with the addition of “natural beauty” and the removal of volunteer and invasive growth. After the removal of hazardous trees and pruning of trees to remain, trees should be replaced in general conformance with this overall plan which takes into account the intent of the Olmsted firm plan. Permanent plantings consisting primarily of shade trees should be interspersed in appropriate locations along pathways for shade. Provide additional vegetation throughout for shade, particularly in relation to the play structure area.

Provide street trees along perimeter streets, setting them on the playground side of the sidewalks to reduce interference with overhead wires in the right of way. Provide evergreen screening at neighboring back yards as suggested in the Kellaway plans.

Views and vistas should be restored wherever possible to maintain the sense of expanse and distance. Reduce the density of vegetation along the brooks, particularly Hammond Brook, to increase visual access to the brooks and the playground in general. Volunteer and invasive growth should be removed throughout the playground.

Shrubs and Horticultural Displays: A desire for more color and variety should be accomplished primarily with large and small trees. The use of shrubs and flowers should be limited to the capacity of the city to maintain them. Large perennial and flower beds are very labor intensive. Areas for the display of flowers should be limited to pedestrian entrances.

Walls and Fences

Walls: Eliminate the stone walls along one or both edges of Hammond Brook and the south end of the brook from Homer Street in conjunction with naturalizing the brooks as discussed under Storm Water Management. Repair and repoint the remaining stone walls and headwalls.

Fences: Provide 42” high vinyl coated chain link fences along Hammond Brook where walls are to remain. Provide a barrier rail along all public way frontage to restrict vehicular access and provide an appropriate public image for the playground. The rail should be of such a design that it does not collect trash. Remove the gates at Homer Street and Tyler Terrace when the barrier rail is installed. At pedestrian entrances provide gate posts as suggested in the Olmsted firm plan. Where necessary, provide bollards at pedestrian entrances and bridges for pedestrian use to prevent vehicular access. Fences for active recreation facilities should be as low as practical [4’ maximum height preferred], vinyl coated and uniform in color, preferably black. Fences that serve no practical purpose should be removed.

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Storm Water Management

Resolve the flooding issue downstream of the site to reduce the impact of providing flood storage capacity inside the playground. Naturalize the brooks in accordance with the intent of the Olmsted firm plan to reduce storm water velocity and increase infiltration. Provide new bridges over the brooks to facilitate improvements in accessibility and circulation. The style of the new bridges should be consistent with the intent of the Olmsted firm plan. That is they should have a style that is compatible with natural scenery. The 4 bridges to remain should be reconstructed in a similar style as such time as they need structural repairs. Existing deteriorated sections of the remaining channels should be repaired as soon as possible.

Utilize excess excavated material, including topsoil, from the various implementation projects to fill in depressions and erosion areas. Provide proper and ongoing maintenance to eliminate concentrated overland flows.

Infrastructure

Electric Service and Lighting: Provide a limited amount of general illumination inside the playground to increase the sense of safety, reduce vandalism and discourage other night time activities in the park. Given that the playground officially closes at dusk and is in a residential neighborhood, sports fields and courts should not be illuminated for night use.

Develop and follow a strategy to make lighting inside the playground more uniform and consistent in terms of poles and fixtures. Select a pole and fixture appropriate for use throughout Newton's historic parks. Light sources should be energy efficient, like color corrected mercury vapor, and they should be shielded so as not to impact abutters and reduce light pollution of the night sky. Replace all nonconforming fixtures.

Remove overhead wires and unnecessary utility poles in the park. Place required electric service underground.

Water Supply: In addition to upgrading drinking fountains, maintain water supply for lawn restoration, plant establishment and cleaning.

Sanitary Sewer: No changes are recommended.

Maintenance Management

Follow the guidelines recommended for the maintenance of the various landscape components that make up Newton Centre Playground. The playground would benefit most with 1 seasonal position during the 8 month busy season assuming outside vendors maintain their current responsibilities, exclusive of administrative staff.

Administrative Management

Friends Groups and Citizen Participation: Encourage the formation of a Friends Group for Newton Centre Playground.

Monuments, Memorials and Commemorative Markers: A restricted growth policy for new monuments, memorials and markers is recommended to encourage the prudent use of Newton Centre Playground's precious space. Establish a moratorium on new monuments, memorials and markers until an overall plan, preferably a citywide plan, for the placement of these items is developed and approved.