

NOTES ON REVISED GOLD STAR MOTHERS PARK DESIGN JUNE 15, 2005 (THIRD PUBLIC MEETING)

1. LANDSCAPING APPROACH:

Consistent with the comments we have heard, the revised design leaves most of the existing walks, hills, and trees. Six trees are removed while adding twenty shade trees, eight flowering ornamental trees and 12 pine trees. New trees are to be planted along the outfield path, to provide shade in the play areas and along the main path connecting Winter Street to the mall. Those removed are either diseased, not thriving, or at points of entry where better visibility is desired for reasons of safety. Raised plant beds with shrubs, and flowering ground covers are proposed primarily at park entrances, as a buffer between the basketball court and abutting residential property, at the flag pole, monuments, and to help “soften” or conceal utility cabinets.

ISSUES: It may seem that a large amount of plantings would have a strong beautifying impact on the park, but it is important to remember that large, lush planting beds can be expensive to install and difficult to maintain. It is also important to note that as plantings grow tall and thick over time, they can reduce visibility throughout the park and detract from a sense of “openness.” This is why the revised design places planting beds in specific areas where they will be well seen or provide needed shade but will not impede views. This approach is reasonable in terms of the City’s maintenance resources and is less likely to contribute to visibility or safety problems in the future.

2. BASKETBALL COURT:

As agreed to at the last meeting, the basketball court will be changed from two full courts to one full and two half courts to encourage a greater diversity of users. In addition, the revised design calls for one of the half court hoops to be lower for children and for ADA compliance. The other half court hoop is to be an alternative hard surface play item called a “Needle Eye”. Buffer plantings for residential properties abutting the court and a drinking fountain will be added.

ISSUES: A suggestion was recently made that the basketball court include night lighting. This will be looked into, however, our assessment would need to consider both the significant cost of new lights and poles, as well as the likelihood that immediate abutters would not approve of this change.

3. THE “HILL” ON THE NORTHERN PARK SIDE:

As agreed to at the last meeting, the hill area should not remain undeveloped or be converted into an off leash area for dogs. The revised design proposes the establishment of a community garden area surrounded by a fence with hedge roses. Nearby tables with game boards, a few strategically placed shade trees and more flowering trees will serve to make it a special place and bring the space to life. The garden would consist of raised beds to address potential soil contamination issues and would be administered by the Cambridge Conservation Commission.

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ISSUES: It has been suggested that a gazebo be included in this space. A gazebo has warm associations for many, and symbolically helps to identify a space as something for adults. However, structures such as gazebos, if not carefully sited and programmed for active use, can become attractive hangouts or nuisances. This location would require a high-quality, steel gazebo, which would be an expensive item and have a significant impact on the project's budget.

4. PATHWAYS TO AND FROM THE TWIN CITIES SHOPPING CENTER:

As agreed to at the last meeting, the northeast park entrance needs to be cleaned up, made more presentable, and there needs to be a safe connecting sidewalk between the park and Monsignor O'Brien Highway. Neighbors have suggested making this a slightly curving path instead of a sidewalk, which may be an aesthetically pleasing alternative and will be studied further. Given the potential increase in activity due to the community garden and park furniture, the revised design includes a fence along the mall edge for reasons of safety and controlling access. As with the design offered at the previous meeting, the revised design proposes connecting to one recently constructed walk in the mall parking lot and envisions opening up a second walk to the north of the skating rink. The revised design also gives more space in front and behind the bleachers and players' benches to make it easier for pedestrians to pass by during softball games.

ISSUES: The revised design aims to make as direct a connection as possible from the shopping mall to Monsignor O'Brien Highway, Winter Street, and Gore Street. We feel that the best way to make the connection from the proposed Monsignor O'Brien Highway sidewalk and the shopping mall entrance is through a pathway along the edge of the parking lot itself, instead of a sidewalk along the entire north edge of the park. However, this connection, along with the proposed pedestrian connection to the north of the skating rink and a possible raised crosswalk to McDonalds, would have to be agreed to by the owners of the Twin Cities Plaza.

5. WALKWAY ALONG THE SKATING RINK:

As with the earlier concept design, the revised design includes a planting of Austrian pine to "soften" or break up the expanse of masonry wall along the lower half of this building, and new lighting. A grass strip has been added along the edge of the building. The suggestion of including some graphic design to some of the upper panel areas of the building is also possible if this building comes under the control of the City. As described at the first public meeting, the standard for newly renovated Cambridge parks is to include one emergency call phone. These items are very tall, visible from a distance, and illuminated with a blue beacon. Given the community interest in more than one emergency phone, the revised design includes two, which we feel should provide excellent coverage.

6. PARK ENTRANCES:

As with the design presented at the previous meeting, the proposal is to install attractive signs, more interesting paving, fencing and landscaping at park entrances to create a sense of

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transition into the park, a sense of arrival and to make the park feel more inviting to everyone.

ISSUES: We have seen the suggestion to put an active use such as a bocce court in the park entrance area off of Winter Street – and we acknowledge that we had ourselves initially proposed a community garden space in this area. However, we now feel that this area should be used as an emergency access by the Department of Public Works. In addition, bocce courts had previously existed in this park but were removed in 1988-89.

7. PLAYGROUNDS AND WATER PLAY AREA:

The challenge facing all play-learning environmental designers include recent advances in safety and accessibility to these facilities for persons with disabilities. Generally speaking, equipment, especially swings, requires more space than a decade ago. In addition, more play components or play events on a given structure need to be accessible than in the past and larger structures require more than one means of access. This tends to impact newer play structures by making them smaller, lower to the ground and with more play components occurring at ground level.

In general, what this means is that the current older children's play space is reasonable in size, the current tot area is way too small if people want swings included (parents generally do), and the current water play area is needlessly large and sprawling. This was the rationale in our earlier concept design for moving the tot play area into the space currently occupied by water play.

Based on comments from the last meeting, the revised design moves the tot space adjacent to the older children's space to make child supervision easier and more comfortable. Water play activity remains where it is although smaller, totally updated and made more interesting for all ages. We have strategically located seating and control points for parents where gates occur, and the size of enclosed play areas is manageable for parents to observe and have good views into those spaces. As with the earlier concept design, the play structures selected are of the highest quality both in terms of play value for children and durability.

Also responding to feedback received since our last meeting, the older kids play structure has been changed to better reflect the wishes of park users for a structure similar in some respects to what they already enjoy about the current wood structure with soaring towers and large slides, while offering up to date play components. This substitution is also very compatible with the other structures selected for the project.

As with my earlier concept design, lots of emphasis is placed on ground level play items that move. Innovative swings for groups of kids, a large rotating platform that can accommodate many, a natural climbing rock with tunnel, other spinning disks for 2-3 kids will likely prove hugely successful and fun. Playing tag on the main structure as well as among all of these structures will continue.

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The revised design provides safe opportunities for children to learn to ride bikes circling along one edge of the playground and older children to ride along the edge of the playground and the existing parallel path. Also, the suggestion to include more natural materials such as meadow grasses and plantings to allow some tag play, hiding, etc. is a good idea and will be incorporated into the design.

ISSUES: It is a natural feeling to want to enclose everything that children might use or come in contact with in a park. On closer inspection, however, this may not be the best way to achieve a safe haven for children to play or to make supervision easier. If a large play area were enclosed by a fence, supervision of this area might be difficult and the size of the area being enclosed would be too large to effectively control what is occurring within the space. This would also result in having entrances spaced far apart from one another, and located away from where parents would typically congregate. In order to improve supervision, seating areas should be located near where gates occur, and typically there should be no more than one way in or out of the fenced playground area. Given the added expense of additional fence work, the fence itself would most likely have to be chain link instead of a more attractive ornamental steel playground fence.

It is also natural to want to have a bike path for children that is completely enclosed within the playground. However, this might cause a safety hazard for other children, particularly toddlers who are not engaged in the bike riding activity. The revised design allows for some circular wheeled play/bike activity along the edge of the playground for small children, while fencing protects those children not on bikes.

A suggestion was made that the climbing rock structure be sited outside of the older children's play area. I have considered this, but it would involve including a paved, wheelchair-accessible walk to it, as well as the additional expense of safety material and fencing. I had also had the idea to site swings here as well but concluded that it is not necessary since there seems to be room enough within the playground to accommodate these items safely. However, this high ground with a nearby shade tree might be a nice location to install picnic tables – near but not inside the playground – that everyone could access.