



DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENT SERVICES – PLANNING DIVISION
REPORT: Forster Park Renovation Site Plan
for consideration January 25, 2022

STAFF REPORT

TO: Planning & Zoning Commission
PREPARED BY: Paul Ashworth, Senior Planner
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PROJECT: Forster Heights Park Renovation
219 Harvard Street
PARCEL ID: 167-714-107
P&Z-COMM-2022-0554

ZONE: OS, Open Space

TYPE: Site Plan for the Forster Park renovation per section 3.3.3.D.(2).

APPLICANT: To Design, LLC/Mary Dehais

OWNER: City of Hartford



Overhead View. City of Harford GIS 2021

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Applicant is requesting site plan approval for various renovations and improvements to Forster Heights Park located in the Southwest neighborhood at 219 Harvard Street. The park was originally acquired and constructed in 1954. Amenities were added over time until the most recent renovation in 2008 of the playground and splash pad.

Proposed improvements today include repair or rebuilding of the playground, basketball court, picnic tables, pedestrian pathways, splash pad, amphitheater and the existing associated parking area. The site plan also includes the installation of a gazebo and informal gathering area in the center of the park and drainage and general site improvements. Landscaping improvements include the installation of a landscape island in the existing parking area, tree pruning and removal of damaged, invasive or diseased trees.

Forster Heights Park is not historically designated.

KEY APPLICATION TIMELINES

- Application Submission Date: December 17, 2021
- Date Application Accepted as Complete: December 17, 2021
- Application Date of Receipt: January 11, 2021 (sooner of either: date of next regularly scheduled meeting, or 35 days after acceptance of complete application)
- Public Hearing is scheduled to open on Tuesday, January 25, 2021; Open Hearing Deadline: March 17, 2021.
- Close Hearing Deadline (if opens January 25, 2021): (35 days after opening) Tuesday, March 1, 2021
- CT General Statutes Sec.8-7D allow that the applicant may consent to one or more extensions of time, provided the total extension of all time periods shall not be for longer than 65 days*.

LEGAL STANDARD

Standard for Application Type:

The Commission reviews site plans in accordance with Zoning Regulations section 1.3.3. Site plans may be modified, conditioned, or denied only if they fail to satisfy the zoning regulations, inland wetland regulations, or subdivision regulations. The Commission may deviate from the minimum requirements for building siting, height, street facades, accessory structures dimensions, tree installation, landscape installation, buffers, fencing, lighting, parking, signage, and street design by up to 15% upon certain findings.

STANDARD SPECIFIC TO THE USE

Sec.3.3.3.D.(2): Park Design Components, Landscape Furnishing, & Art

- (a) The commission shall review and approve, through the site plan review process of 1.3.3., the design of any and all pieces of furniture (including but not limited to benches, chairs, and tables), trash receptacles, drinking water fountains, lighting fixtures, fencing, buildings, structures, historic and monument sites, playground equipment, athletic equipment, decorative fountains...

- (b) Notwithstanding the preceding subsection, the commission may adopt a schedule of approved site furniture, drinking water fountains, lighting fixtures, and fencing for each park or group of parks, and any item on the approved schedule may be installed for the relevant park without requiring additional commission review.

FINDING OF FACTS

Proposed Materials

- Concrete benches to be replaced with steel benches;
- Proposed pavilion to be made of metal frame and roof;
- Most existing equipment such as the basketball court, playground and amphitheater will be repaired and painted as needed;
- New picnic tables to be metal frame with hard thermoplastic surfaces.

Landscaping

- The plan identifies many diseased, damaged or invasive trees to be removed;
- Proposed tree plantings include 10 trees of the following species: Elm, Beech, Red Maple and Ginko Biloba.

Parking Area

- Will resurfaced and restriped with a new landscape island.
- Grading will be such that outflow will be completely directed to Amherst Street.

Review conducted on:

- Site Plans entitled: “Park Improvements to Forster heights Park,” prepared by ToDesign, LLC, dated 12/17/2021 and last revised 1/14/22.

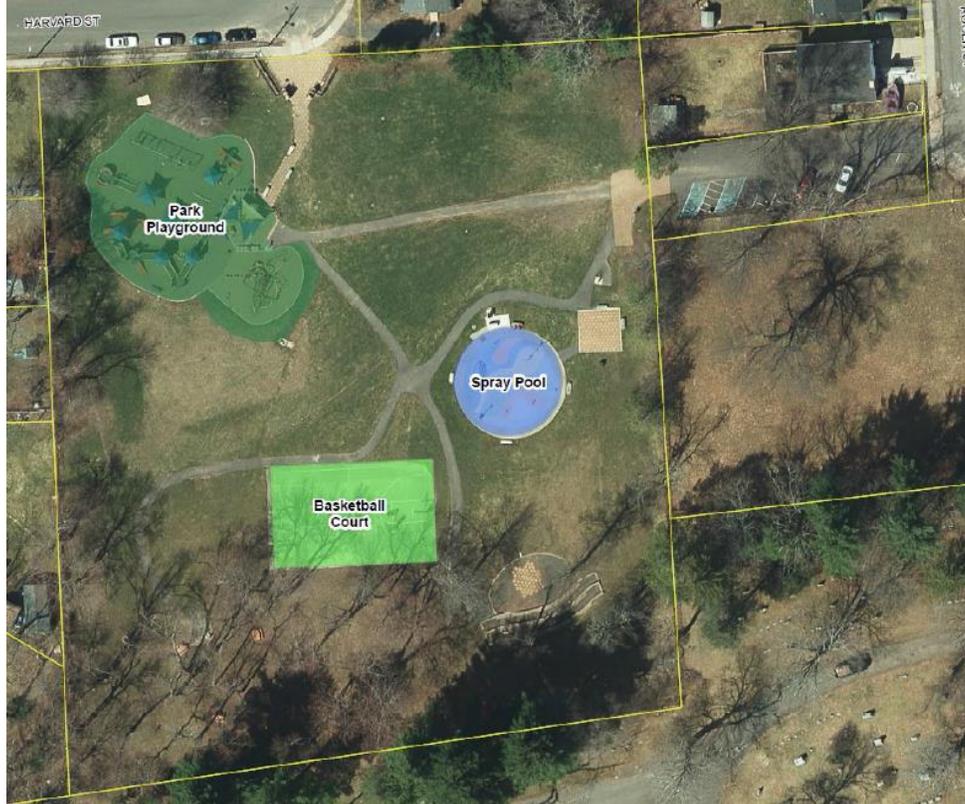


Figure 1. Existing Layout – TO Design 2022

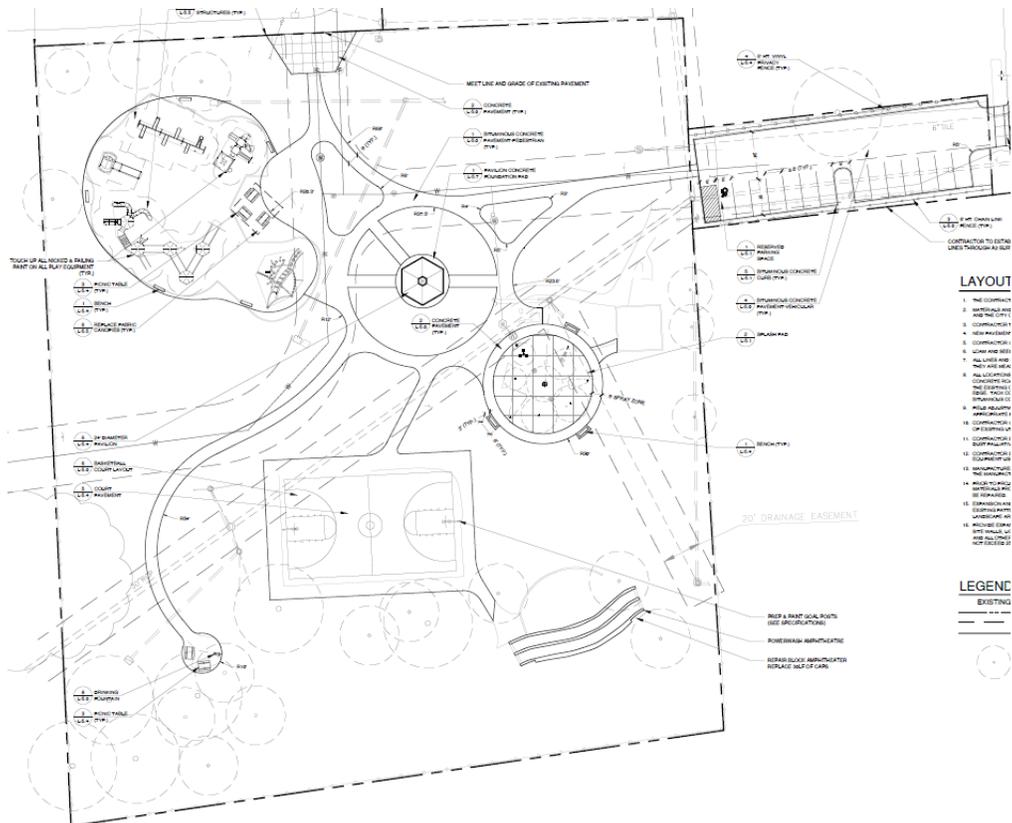


Figure 2. Proposed Layout – TO Design 2022

COMMENTS RECEIVED (DEPARTMENTS, AGENCIES, NRZs, PUBLIC)

The Southwest/Behind the Rocks NRZ (SW/BTR NRZ) was notified of the subject request on August 23, 2021. As of this writing no formal response has been received by Staff. The applicant attended the December 14, 2021 SW/BTR NRZ monthly meeting and presented the plan set to the NRZ. The project was met with general approval with comments mainly concerning parking and park security after hours. Additional comments included a complaint regarding soggy ground near the northwest corner of the park along the fence line and a gap in the fence along Amhurst Street.

ANALYSIS

The proposed Forster Heights Park improvements as shown on the provided site plan set generally meets the requirements of the Zoning Regulations (the Regulations). All new facilities appear to be made of durable materials suited to the location such as metal and thermoplastic. Most existing facilities are to be painted and repaired in place. Some accessory improvements include the resurfacing of the area beneath the playground and the removal of the asphalt basketball court in favor of a concrete court.

The NRZ concerns have been addressed in the following ways:

- Investigation of the cause of the soggy ground in the northwest corner of the park has been coordinated with the MDC and the applicant has proposed exploration of some water infrastructure in that sector via remote camera to look for leaks.
- The gap in the fence along Amhurst will be closed with the new fencing.

- The new striping plan appears to increase parking capacity without expanding the parking footprint by increasing efficiency.

The Hartford Zoning Regulations require that all new facilities, furniture, etc, proposed in Hartford parks be approved by the Planning & Zoning Commission. Staff does not have any specific comments regarding the design of the park, or, of the materials and design of the proposed facilities such as the picnic tables or pavilion. All new facilities appear to be made of durable materials suited to the location.

All proposed fencing appears to be 6' in height throughout the park including adjacent to roadways and in the front yard. The zoning regulations do not make specific allocations for fences in the OS, Open Space district. However, Section 6.13.2 "Other Districts" provides for the ability of residential uses in certain districts to construct 6' fences in the corner side yard. The nature of the subject park use located within a residential area, combined with the NRZ's concern for security at night gives ample basis for allowing the proposed fence design. Further, the fencing proposed is replacing or repairing existing fencing. The Commission's approval of this site plan would allow the existing conditions to continue.

The current tree planting plan does not appear to meet the requirements for parking lots. The new plan for the lot used for parking for Forster Heights Park includes the installation of a new landscape island. The addition of the landscape island is a needed improvement to provide shade on the parking area and reduce the urban heat island effect, however the tree requirements must be met. The applicant has confirmed they will review the tree plan prior to the Commission meeting for this item.

Planning Documents Review

The 1992 Hartford Parks Master Plan gives specific recommendations for Forster Heights park, however site conditions have changes significantly and the 1992 assessment is for the most part no longer relevant. The plan does identify drainage as an area of potential improvement citing that parts of neighboring Cedar Hill Cemetery drain into the park and the catch basins in 1992 proved insufficient to handle the flow. It is unclear whether this is still an issue today.

The 2014 Capital City Parks Plan identifies certain recommended improvements based on a more current assessment. The Capital City plan notes very general improvements should be made such as "Basic improvements – fencing, benches, paths, security cameras, etc.; Low mow" and "Recreation upgrades – Court, playground, & spray pad renovations." All of the 2014 recommendations of the plan are captured here except for the installation of the security camera. The addition of a security camera was discussed at the December 14, 2021 NRZ meeting and the local HPD Community Service Officer confirmed he would discuss with his chain of command the potential installation of a camera by HPD for this site.

Summary

The proposed improvements to Forster Heights Park are consistent with the intention of the Zoning Regulations and all applicable planning documents.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends approval of the plan with the following condition:

1. The tree planting plan be revised to meet the requirements for parking lots and a net increase in total tree canopy.

A draft resolution follows.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Relevant Sections of December 14, 2021 SW/BTR NRZ Meeting Minutes

REVIEWED AND EDITED BY,

Aimee Chambers, Director



**CITY OF HARTFORD
PLANNING & ZONING COMMISSION RESOLUTION
219 HARVARD STREET
SITE PLAN REVIEW OF FORSTER HEIGHTS PARK RENOVATIONS**

Whereas, The City of Hartford Planning & Zoning Commission reviewed the application and attached documents regarding the request for approval of a site plan per Section 3.3.3.D.(2) of the Zoning Regulations for renovations to Forster Heights Park; and

Whereas, The subject property is located in the OS, Open Space district; and

Whereas, Section 3.3.3.D.(2) requires that the Planning & Zoning Commission review and approve, through the site plan review process of 1.3.3., the design of any and all pieces of furniture (including but not limited to benches, chairs, and tables), trash receptacles, drinking water fountains, lighting fixtures, fencing, buildings, structures, historic and monument sites, playground equipment, athletic equipment, etc; and

Whereas, The proposed renovations include mostly repairing and painting of existing equipment but all new facilities appear to be of standard design and made of durable materials; and

Whereas, The proposed renovations are consistent with the 2014 Capital City Parks Plan and the Zoning Regulations; and

Whereas, The proposed design of the park is very similar to the existing park with improvements to the pedestrian pathing system and the addition of a pavilion in the middle of the park; and

Now therefore Be It

Resolved, The City of Hartford Planning & Zoning Commission hereby **denies/approves** the request for approval of a site plan per Section 3.3.3.D.(2) of the Zoning Regulations renovations to Forster Heights Park as shown on the plan set titled "Park Improvements to Forster Heights Park," prepared by To Design, LLC, dated 12/17/2021 and last revised 1/14/22, with the following conditions:

1. The tree planting plan be revised to meet the requirements for parking lots in Sec.6.10 and provide a net increase in total tree canopy.

Be It Further,

Resolved, This 25th day of January, 2022.

Attachment 1 – Relevant Sections of December 14, 2021 SW/BTR NRZ Meeting
Minutes

12. Next were the featured guests of this meeting, Phil Barlow, Principal of the firm To Design, and Julia Jack, DPW Architect. Mr. Barlow has been working with the Hartford park system for about 25 years. Ms. Jack expressed their excitement about the design development for the upgrade to Forster Park, saying that they want our feedback about we do or do not love about the design.
13. The first thing was a description of the current state of the park. It has a fairly large playground that is used a lot. Unfortunately, the splash pad wasn't working or working well throughout the summer. Also the basketball court has had its problems, as most residents in the area know. There is a shady grove in the back in which there are picnic tables and barbecue grills. To Design is suggesting that a gazebo structure with space for tables and offering more shade be added to the park. The design also calls for a community garden area, which will be sodded at first but available for gardening if that is desired in the future. The play equipment will also be updated. There will be fewer above ground features, because those tend to get vandalized. They are hoping in the upgrade to get a few more parking spaces on Amherst Street.
14. Here, residents expressed interest in having more parking specifically for the park and also expressed gratitude for the signs that have recently gone up and the improved gatekeeping, both at their request. In general, as has been expressed by residents, they would like it if there was more control over parking — especially street parking and especially illegal street parking — and the locking and unlocking of the gates. Mr. Barlow and Ms. Jack assured residents that they are aware of their concerns. Director Castle interjected that there are plans in place to increase parking and after hours enforcement in the early warm weather of 2022. The city wants to get the message out early that they mean business.
15. In this regard, there was a question as to whether the fence on the Harvard Street side could be moved. Residents described the situation where some people hang out by the fence smoking and drinking and are very near the playground where the children are. In the summer, neighbors are terrorized by these people who are coming to the playground, who don't live around here, they let their children off to play and then stay in their cars where they can watch them, sitting, drinking, smoking and often blocking neighborhood driveways. The design team responded that there are 10 spaces on the Amherst Street side now and maybe a few more can be added.

16. At this, Councilwoman Marilyn Rossetti remarked that the parking issue won't go away because we just have a parking issue due to space constraints. But, compelling is the quality of life piece where residents cannot exit their driveways. So, maybe we need to be more serious about adding parking places. People are going to come to the park and park someplace and only more parking area will ease the situation for the neighbors.
17. Our CSO, Officer Joel Otero suggested that maybe we should put a camera and some signs that say that the area is under surveillance. This has been done in other parks and it is not only a deterrent but gives the HPD an eye on things. He thinks that it's a great tool and should be looked into. He will talk to his chain of command about whether a permanent camera could be installed there.
18. Paul Ashworth added that we have a good situation in that the park is heavily used by the children but, unfortunately, there is also adult bad behavior while the children are playing. Director Castle wondered whether we could ask DPW to stripe the street so that it is obvious where parking is permitted. That would, of course, be coupled with additional enforcement; for example, one warning and next time a ticket. This park, playground, basketball court, and picnic area are assets that we cannot lose because of these bad characters. A resident spoke up that the Hartford Parking Authority recently came out and did some striping and also put up signs. Officer Otero said that for the time being, we should leave the striping and signs and enforce them so we don't lose the momentum. Director Castle added that more striping should be done in the spring. What's called for is to reduce street parking, define prohibited street parking, and enforce. So, residents — who we know are vigilant and proactive — need to keep their eyes on this and call consistently at the start-up of the season. A resident agreed that enforcement is key because, before this concerted effort to improve this situation, this was the park that was not getting police/parking authority attention so people screwed up here on purpose because they could get away with it. Officer Otero agreed that this direction looks solid, especially for during the day, and we will have to work also on the problems that occur after closing.

19. Finally, Officer Otero added that he lived near Forster Park growing up and often used the park. One thing he noticed, even as a kid, and now, as a police officer, gets complaints about, is that there is always water along the sidewalk. This has been happening for years, it's mushy and kind of gross. Could the design team look into that. Mr. Barlow expressed being impressed with the level of knowledge of and care for the park — the excess water situation is something he did not know. He thought that there must be some kind of water leak and that they will definitely investigate it. Jeff King from the MDC commented with several possible sources of underground flow and Mr. Barlow took note of these.

20. Kathy Evans mentioned that her understanding is that the design will be done around April 2022 and that construction will begin in early summer of 2022. Mr. Barlow concurred, saying that the park will be offline for some amount of time this coming season.

21. Kathy Evans asked whether there is a lighting plan, to which Mr. Barlow responded that there is no lighting plan and there is no intention to create one. There is agreement that it's not clear if lights help or hinder undesirable activity. There was a comment that maybe lights that respond to motion detectors should be considered.

22. A resident mentioned that on summer nights in the corner there is a lot of activity even if the gate is closed, because of the fence gap at Amherst Street. Mr. Barlow responded that they can do something about the gap.

There was also conversation about the perils of not being able to prevent vehicles from entering the park grounds; not just cars, but ATV's and dirt bikes can do a tremendous amount of damage.

23. Kathy Evans thanked our guests, asking them to keep us up to date and to let us know anytime they would like to return and be put on the agenda.