

## How should Metroparks spend \$8M to improve Gordon Park?



Aerial photos of the southern portion of Gordon Park show how the I-90 Shoreway severed the park from Lake Erie, and how a CSX rail line separates it from the nearby St. Clair Superior neighborhood.

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Ask Demetrius Lawrence about improvements he'd like to see at the southern portion of Gordon Park on Cleveland's East Side and he has plenty of ideas.

Lawrence, who operates a tow motor for Goodwill Industries and who lives in the adjacent St. Clair Superior neighborhood, said during a recent visit to the park that he'd like to see better lighting and more activities for children.

He thinks the park's five, rarely used baseball diamonds, enclosed by chain link and clustered around a central service building, might be reduced in number to make space for other pastimes, including flag football.

He'd like to see improvements made to the narrow pedestrian bridge that spans the Interstate 90 Shoreway to connect the north and south halves of the park.

"It could look more vibrant, you know," he said. "It could be more catchy for people who want to walk across the bridge. The area down there is not really kept up and maintained."

Lawrence's views are exactly the kind of comments that a team of landscape architects and community planners want to hear, starting Tuesday 6 to 7:30 p.m. at the Edward J. Kovacic Recreation Center, 6250 St. Clair Ave.

Cleveland Metroparks, LAND Studio and the St. Clair Superior Development Corp. will hold the first large-scale public meeting focusing on how Metroparks and its partners should spend \$8 million donated in 2023 by the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation.

The money from Mandel is intended to bring near-term improvements to the southern portion of Gordon Park, which was severed from the northern half of the park, and Lake Erie, by construction of the Shoreway between the 1930s and the 1950s.

The era was notorious for the cavalier way in which highway engineers slammed concrete arteries through low-income and minority neighborhoods ill-equipped to fight back.

Wealthier and better-connected communities including the inner ring Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, which blocked construction of the Clark Freeway in the 1960s, were more successful in resisting the onslaught.

The I-90 Shoreway cut Gordon Park in half, leaving the triangular southern portion, with its 47.7 acres, landlocked between East 72nd Street and Shoreway ramps to the west, and CSX railroad lines to the south. Connections to Rockefeller Park and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive to the east are not well established or often used.

"It's trapped and disconnected from everything around it, making it so people can't use it," Greg Peckham, LAND Studio's executive director, said during a recent interview at the park. "This process is about reconnecting it, exposing people to it, bringing it back. It's not going to be what it was, but it's going to have a new life."

Metroparks expects to use information gathered from surrounding communities to shape new investments in the park starting next year. But the parks agency, which is leasing the space from the city, isn't imposing top-down solutions.

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“Our process is to allow the plan to organically take shape,” said Sean McDermott, Metroparks chief planner. “It’s really going to start here with meetings coming up. Right now, we are listening.”

In a recent conversation around a picnic table at the park, McDermott and other members of the project team said they wanted to hear how nearby residents get to the park, what they do there, and what changes they’d like to see.

Those questions are pertinent, the planners said, because pedestrian connections to the park are especially poor. It’s a half-mile walk from St. Clair to the park along heavily trafficked East 72nd Street.

“It’s not just the distance, but it’s also the nature of the street — all the concrete and the unkept nature of the rail overpass. There’s nothing inviting about that path,” said Terri Hamilton Brown, executive director of St. Clair Superior Development.

Brown said she sees the Mandel Foundation’s investment as an opportunity to create a stronger sense of connection between the park and residential areas to the south, now severed by the rail line.

Forging such connections could help stimulate revitalization in St. Clair Superior, a working-class, racially mixed neighborhood with a strong Slovenian immigrant heritage, but also with tattered commercial corridors and hundreds of vacant lots, she said.

Brown and other planners are especially keen on exploring the possibility of reactivating a long disused pedestrian tunnel that cuts underneath the CSX line. The tunnel is similar to two on the city’s West Side connecting the Detroit Superior neighborhood to 147-acre Edgewater Park, also leased by the city to Metroparks.

“We see the tunnel as an amazing opportunity,” McDermott said. “We are going to do further analysis to confirm it can be used as a neighborhood connection.”

Additional connections could be created or improved between Rockefeller Park and Gordon Park, along East 72nd Street and East 79th Street, the planners said.

Over the long haul, planners are dreaming of rejoining the severed halves of the park by building a more robust connection over the



A plan view of the Cleveland lakefront CHEERS project, Cleveland Harbor Eastern Embayment Resilience Strategy, shows a reconfigured park made of landfill with larger sheltered bay and cove areas designed to withstand wind and wave action.

Shoreway — something bigger and more beautiful than the existing narrow walkway bridge.

“This is the exciting part,” Metroparks CEO Brian Zimmerman said last year when the Mandel grant was announced. “How do we reconnect, how do we reimagine this park being pulled back together over the top of the freeway system in a fashion that’s greater than just a walkway? We are certainly interested in how to reimagine and reconnect this community.”

Gordon Park could also be better connected to the upcoming Metroparks CHEERS project, short for Cleveland Harbor Eastern Embayment Resiliency Study.

The regional parks agency is planning to use clean, recycled sediment dredged from the Cuyahoga River over the next 20 years to create up to 75 acres of new park land in Lake Erie between the East 55th Street Marina and the western edge of the lakefront portion of Gordon Park at East 72nd Street north of the Shoreway.

By next year, Metroparks, Cuyahoga County and the City of Cleveland are scheduled to finish a new, 2.7-mile off-road paved segment of the Cleveland Lakefront Bikeway from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to the East 55th Street Marina, which connects to the sliver of the lakefront portion of Gordon Park at East

72nd. Street. Funding for the \$11.7 million trail project includes \$5 million from the Mandel Foundation.

McDermott said Clevelanders shouldn’t think of this new, larger park area on the lakefront as the East Side equivalent of Edgewater, which draws a regional audience.

The parks agency has been asked to ensure first and foremost that improvements at Gordon Park serve nearby residents in the St. Clair Superior, Hough and Glenville neighborhoods, he said.

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Demetrius Lawrence, left, enjoyed a picnic recently at the southern portion of Gordon Park near the Cleveland lakefront with his girlfriend, Shanica Norman.

Big questions facing the southern portion of Gordon Park include whether its five baseball diamonds should remain in their entirety. They occupy nearly a third of the park. The open green areas around them can feel like leftover spaces squeezed between the ballfields and surrounding parking lots and roads.

Over the past year, Metroparks has made improvements that include installing new park benches, picnic tables and trash receptacles. They tore down the crumbling, half-collapsed city aquarium that once occupied part of the site. They've also trimmed trees. Clair Superior, Hough and Glenville neighborhoods, he said.

LAND Studio received \$725,000 from the Mandel Foundation to coordinate the current park planning effort and to facilitate near-term upgrades to streetscapes in St. Clair Superior including public art. The community development corporation is also planning to plant more than 200 trees along St. Clair Avenue, with funding from the Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Brown said.

LAND Studio's Peckham said he's especially aware that the park is now most heavily used on Saturday and Sunday afternoons in the summer when residents parade their cars around the parking lot and play music on loudspeakers in a series of regular, informal gatherings.

"Those are things that are the existing heartbeat of a place, and they're positive, they should be supported," he said. "We need to understand those things and figure out how to accommodate them as part of the planning process."

Lawrence, who visited the park after his shift at Goodwill, was picnicking with his girlfriend, Shanica Norman, who brought her two grandchildren along. They reveled in the cool, dry breeze on a bright afternoon after a summer cold front pushed hot, humid air further south.

The aroma of hotdogs cooking on a tabletop hibachi filled the air, as they watched the children play on playground equipment.

"They love the park," Norman said. "They call it the swing park."

Lawrence said he and Norman came that day because they knew the park would be quieter and more tranquil than it is when cars parade through the parking lot.

But as he noted the empty ballfields nearby, he said: "It's not vibrant. It's dead. You need things that attract families."