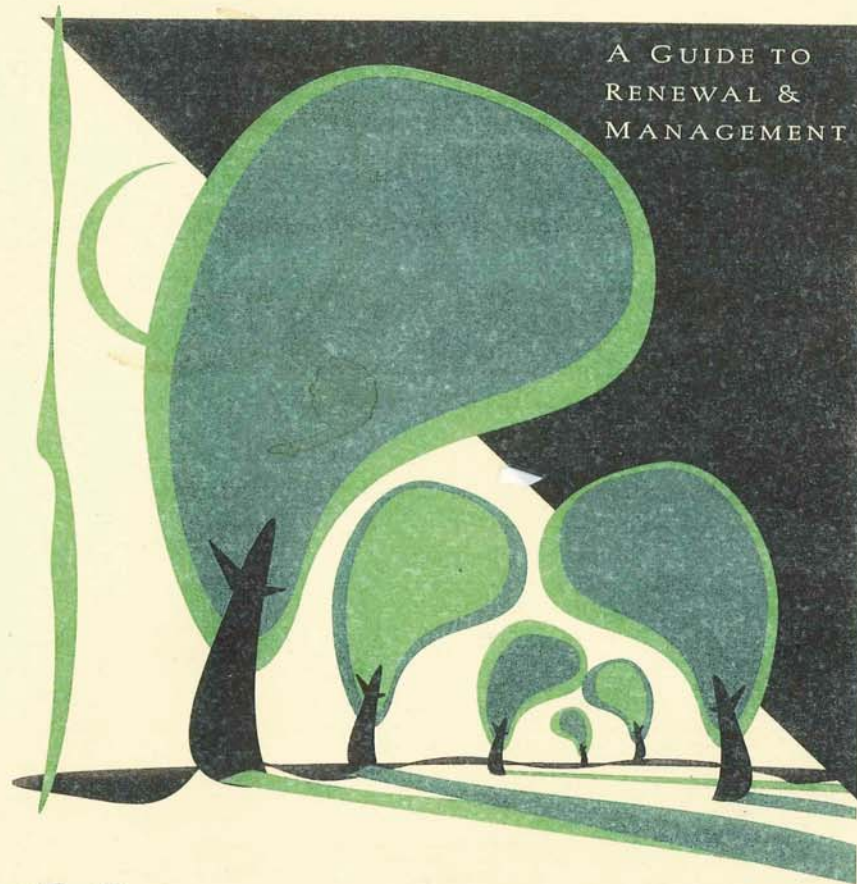


Louisville's *Olmsted* Parks and Parkways



*M*A S T E R *plan*

*Master Plan for Louisville's Olmsted Parks & Parkways*  
*A Guide to Renewal and Management*

*Prepared for the City of Louisville, Kentucky*  
*Jerry E. Abramson, Mayor*

*By the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, Inc.*

*In conjunction with the Louisville and Jefferson County Parks Department*

*June 1994*

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City of Louisville  
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

JERRY E. ABRAMSON  
MAYOR

601 W. Jefferson Street • Louisville, KY 40202-2728  
(502) 574-3061 • Fax (502) 574-4201

Dear Friend:

My family and I take great pride and enjoyment in Louisville's parks. Our city is blessed with a beautiful system of parks and parkways designed by the father of landscape architecture, Frederick Law Olmsted, more than a century ago. Only five cities in the world can proudly claim such a historic system—and ours could be the greatest of all if we put into practice the principles and strategies contained within this visionary Master Plan.

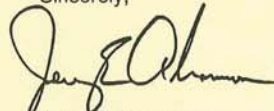
I created the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy in 1990 to be the city's partner in planning and funding the renewal of our Olmsted parks and parkways. We are working together effectively to address the critical need for preserving the Olmsted legacy. Our tool is a practical plan for specific projects, management strategies, and maintenance techniques—all designed to preserve and enhance this great work of landscape art, which is so vital to Louisville's ecological health, economic growth, and quality of life.

Intended as a working document, the Master Plan looks forward several decades and recommends projects totaling \$55 million dollars. Private foundations, corporations and the City of Louisville all are playing key roles in funding these improvements for generations to come.

But the most essential element of success is the support of individual citizens like yourself. I urge you to study this document and take it to heart. Let it stimulate a new commitment of your energies and resources toward reviving our treasured parklands. Whether through active use, volunteering, or financial giving, the essential factor in community ownership is you.

Our entire metropolitan community will benefit immeasurably from this renewed commitment to Louisville's living legacy!

Sincerely,



Jerry E. Abramson  
Mayor

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Additional copies of this document are available from:

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# Master Plan for Louisville's Olmsted Parks & Parkways

## A Guide to Renewal and Management

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Credits for photographs and drawings are cited in parentheses at the end of captions. FLONHS indicates that the document or plan cited is in the archives of the National Park Service's Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline MA. Olmsted quotations are from "Olmsted Documentary Resource for Louisville's Park Legacy: Cherokee, Iroquois and Shawnee Parks and The Parkways," by Charles E. Beveridge and Arleyn A. Vevee, prepared for the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, 1992.

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### *Reference Materials*

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"Olmsted Documentary Resource for Louisville's Park Legacy: Cherokee, Iroquois and Shawnee Parks and The Parkways," by Charles E. Beveridge and Arleyn A. Levee, prepared for the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, 1992.

"Louisville's Olmsted Park Legacy: Selective Chronology for Cherokee, Iroquois and Shawnee Parks and the Parkways," by Arleyn Levee, prepared for the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, 1992.

"Guiding Principles, Goals and Objectives," by The Halvorson Company, prepared for the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, June 1992.

"Master Plan Briefing Report: Inventory & Analysis Phase," by PDR Engineers, Inc., prepared for the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, 17 November 1992. This report includes drainage plans at a scale of 1"=200', along with related reference materials.

"Plant Communities & Disturbance Analysis for the Louisville Olmsted Parks: Shawnee, Cherokee and Iroquois," by Hal Bryan and John MacGregor, Eco-Tech, Inc., prepared for the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy, November 1992. This report includes park plans at a scale of 1"=200' for park plant communities and disturbances.

"Master Plan for Iroquois Park," prepared by the Louisville Community Design Center, November 1986.

# Preface

We citizens of Louisville and our neighbors have been given a magnificent work of art—our public system of parks and parkways, designed by the great master, Frederick Law Olmsted.

This is an incomparable gift, a work of landscape architecture surpassing anything in the region. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it is one of only five Olmsted park and parkway systems in existence.

These Olmsted parks are a precious common ground where we can build social ties, or refresh and renew our private selves. Altogether, the system has helped to: define the city's form, preserve the rich native landscape, and improve property values. It is a daily mecca for recreation and relaxation.

On closer examination, this great work of art and nature—still dazzling to first-time visitors—has fallen into disrepair and is coming apart at the seams, in risk of ever-expanding infrastructural damage. Much of the danger lies hidden from casual eyes.

But the Olmsted system is not beyond repair. With intensive care and extensive work, it can again become a great example of creative civic design. Therefore, it must be renewed and protected by those who love it and use it—the citizens of Metropolitan Louisville.

A century ago, our predecessors foresaw the need to escape from the city into the healing world of nature. Theirs was a remarkable civic partnership that championed planning, raised substantial money, and summoned the goodwill and resources of the community at large.

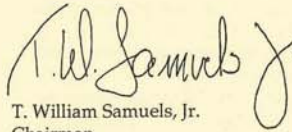
But we must now address fifty years of decline. With public disinvestment since World War II, along with over-use and natural disasters, time has taken a heavy toll. Many hands have held the reins, often taking an inconsistent course or neglecting to follow the Olmsted plans. The degradation of the parks and parkways is a result of the breakdown in the relationship between the community and its great landscapes—a separation damaging to all parties.

Now, after one hundred years, we have come full circle, returning to the idea of parks as a public/private trust under the leadership of Mayor Jerry Abramson. With the support of the Board of Aldermen, former Parks Director Robert O. Kirchdorfer and the Louisville Friends of Olmsted Parks, Mayor Abramson created the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy as a public/private partnership with the City of Louisville. The Conservancy's mission is to help renew the Olmsted parks and parkways for generations to come.

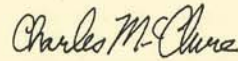
This Master Plan is the road map to the future of the Olmsted park system. Developed cooperatively with citizens, key public agencies, and elected officials, the Plan will be the basis for decisions affecting our invaluable Olmsted parks and parkways. It shows how we can rebuild a working infrastructure, restore health to natural systems, and recapture historic character. The Master Plan will be implemented by the Parks Department, with the advice and financial support of the Conservancy. The crucial ingredient to its success, of course, is a shared commitment to real and ongoing citizen involvement, along with a willingness to experiment and learn by doing.

The creation of the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy and the resulting Master Plan represents an investment of \$1 million by the City of Louisville over a four-year period. This Master Plan sets the stage for a substantial return on that public investment by the private sector over the next several decades.

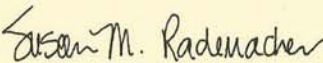
One hundred and three years ago, Frederick Law Olmsted urged our community to "ADOPT AN IDEAL" . . . and to let it guide all future planning and actions. The Master Plan brings this ideal back to life. And with the involvement of citizens like you, we can preserve and improve our premier system of Olmsted parks and parkways for the benefit of all.



T. William Samuels, Jr.  
Chairman  
Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy



Charles K. McClure III  
Vice-Chairman, Master Planning



Susan Rademacher  
Executive Director

# Executive Summary

Prepared by the Louisville Olmsted Parks Conservancy

The most crucial role of the Master Plan is to develop an appropriate vision of the parks and parkways that incorporates history, acknowledges today's realities, and confronts and reconciles the most serious problems faced by these landscapes in the foreseeable future. All actions must be guided, as Olmsted's were, by respect for the inherent quality of the landscape.

Five needs were identified as the result of interviews with more than 600 citizens, study of Olmsted's design intent and inventory and analysis of current conditions.

1. Provide serviceable infrastructure for active and passive recreational areas.
2. Restore and sustain plant and animal communities.
3. Reconcile conflicts among users.
4. Recapture the original vision for each park.
5. Develop programs and funding partnerships, upgrade Parks Department resources, and establish review policies to assure that proposed projects are fitting and maintainable.

Five principles guided an inter-disciplinary approach to meeting these needs.

1. The parks resources are based on natural processes which must be preserved and enhanced.
2. Renewal efforts must respect Olmsted's design values and plans.
3. The parks and parkways are a unique and crucial component of the city's fabric.
4. People of all ages and abilities should be able to enjoy the parks.
5. Management is the key to improvement, requiring a skilled and equipped work force, volunteer coordination and stable funding.

## The Olmsted Legacy

When Frederick Law Olmsted was commissioned to design a park system for Louisville in 1891, he was already the acknowledged father of American landscape design, famous for his work on Central Park in New York, the U.S. Capitol Grounds, and the Biltmore estate. Olmsted's greatest achievement, however, was his concept of creating a system of parks connected to tree-lined parkways, instead of freestanding parks as was the common practice. His concept was most fully realized in Louisville, the ultimate park system of his career, and one of only five such Olmsted systems in the world.

It was quite a revolutionary idea for the turn of the century. Not only did Olmsted's plan integrate the native landscape throughout the entire city as it was projected to grow, but it created a system of green spaces that all social and economic groups could enjoy.

Olmsted designed for three types of recreation:

1. *Recreative* or individual use, such as walking or relaxing;
2. *Gregarious* or social use, such as picnics;
3. *Exertive* or athletic use, such as ballgames.

These activities were to be enjoyed in enhanced parklands where "sequestered and limitless natural scenery" could have a "poetic and tranquilizing influence" on an urban populace otherwise surrounded by brick and steel, cement and fumes.

Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. and his son John Charles Olmsted conceived the Louisville system. Olmsted Sr. worked on its design and implementation until his retirement in 1895. Then John Charles and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. continued the work actively through 1912, with occasional consultation until 1935. Together the Olmsted firm was responsible for 16 parks and a 14.2-mile parkway system that has shaped the City of Louisville and provided a wealth of open spaces for its citizens.

## Current Status of the Olmsted System

In the years since the Olmsted firm concluded its work in Louisville, stewardship of the system has lapsed due to natural and human forces, reduced maintenance budgets and skilled staff, lack of funding for cyclic capital improvements and piecemeal actions that do not contribute to the overall use and maintenance of these public landscapes.

Each park and parkway has changed in countless ways over time. A great volume of cars pass through each day. Century-old drainage systems are collapsing. Active recreation facilities have been placed in important open spaces, and buildings do not blend into the landscape. Large numbers of undirected park users compact soils and once healthy woodlands are being lost to invasive plants. Over-reliance on mowing has depleted natural systems.

Fortunately, just as there are now accepted standards for rehabilitating a landmark building or a famous painting, there are accepted standards for rehabilitating historic landscapes. Thankfully, Louisville has a rich archival record of what was intended for its own great parks, making it possible to rehabilitate them with exceptional integrity and quality.

## Renewing Shawnee Park

The key to unlocking the potential of Shawnee Park is to revive both its great sporting tradition and its historic landscape at the same time. Olmsted's vision of Shawnee as the great public space of the city can be recaptured, so that it is again a place for picnics, field sports, parades and large gatherings all within view of the magnificent Ohio River.

The Master Plan shows how we can:

- Restore the Great Lawn to an expansive open space by relocating deteriorated facilities to a new active recreation complex in Hornung Field and River Glen. The complex will include four regulation baseball fields, four basketball courts, and six tennis courts, as well as picnic pavilions, concession areas, walkways and parking.
- Recapture river views. New pathways will lead down the riverbank to Riverwalk, a seven-mile recreational trail connecting downtown Louisville with Chickasaw Park. Views will be reopened and maintained by planting the riverbank with low-growing native grasses and shrubs.
- Reestablish the Music Concourse, Olmsted's only formal garden for Louisville's parks, with flowering plants as a focus for horticultural education and therapy. Walkways will connect to the Music Pavilion in a mini-amphitheater created by regrading the floodwall.
- Upgrade the infrastructure. Southwestern Parkway will be enhanced by recaptured green space and replacement street trees. A recreation lane will be dedicated on the main park drive, along with formalized parallel parking, two new lots and an overflow area for large events. Drainage systems will be improved and restored.
- Protect and preserve the rare ravine forest for habitat and education.

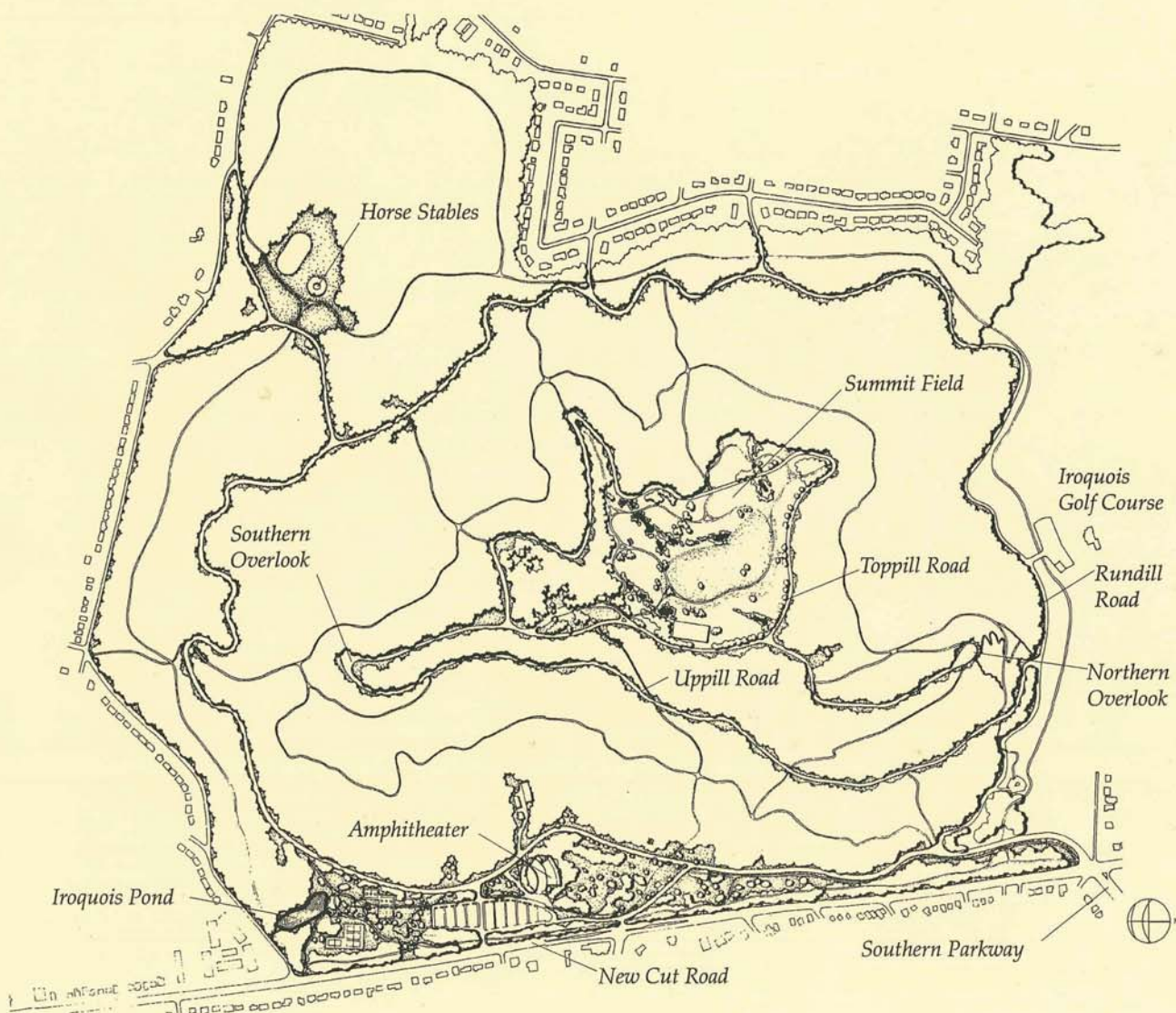
Just as Iroquois and Cherokee Parks have their unique qualities which can attract visitors region-wide, so too does Shawnee. Reclaiming its special character will transform Shawnee into a premier space for celebrating family fitness, the riverside environment and our rich heritage and cultural diversity.

# Illustrative Master Plan for Shawnee Park





## Illustrative Master Plan for Iroquois Park



## Renewing Iroquois Park

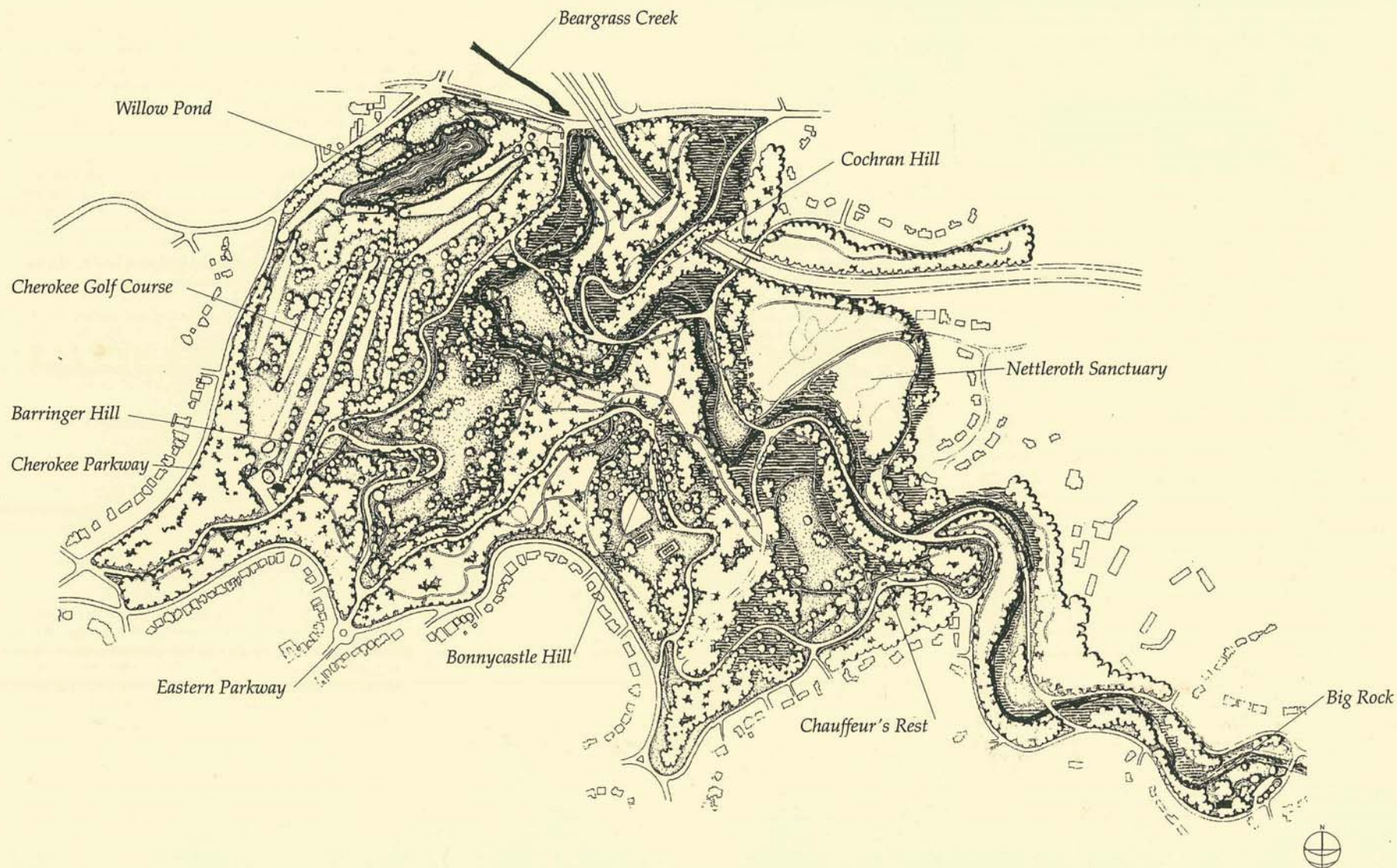
Iroquois Park, a remarkable remnant of Louisville's original landscape, was envisioned by Olmsted as a "scenic reservation" of forested hillsides and breathtaking views, laid out to provide a wilderness experience for people of all abilities. Iroquois today is a "base-line natural area of high diversity and utmost importance to urban Louisville," according to ecologist Hal Bryan, of Eco-Tech, Inc. Just as Olmsted intended, it should be conserved and made enjoyable.

The Master Plan shows how we can:

- Implement a consistent maintenance and repair program for the road and drainage system. The infrastructure of inlets, drains and culverts can be improved and rebuilt and detention basins can be installed in Summit Field to control erosion and flooding, while enriching the park's native beauty and wildlife habitat.
- Repair woodland paths. Restoring the trail system will offer visitors a fascinating tour through an amazing array of forest communities. With "Wayside Rests," informative signs telling the ecological and historical story of the park and restoration of stone steps and drainage, trails will direct use and protect more fragile zones such as the Shale Barrens, an unusual rocky outcropping.
- Reconstruct bridle paths to provide a scenic route with safe footing through less fragile lowland areas.
- Rearrange the developed zone along New Cut Road to separate conflicting uses. A landscaped arrival area will support the amphitheater's renewal; open spaces will be restored for family picnicking and play; and new tennis and basketball courts will be located east of the reorganized parking lot.
- Renew all major vistas. Vegetation will be managed to keep existing views open and overgrown overlooks at Krupps Point and Panther Point will be reopened.
- Develop the park's potential as an educational resource. Develop a program of activities and interpretive information/signage. Establish cooperative environmental education and volunteer programs with local and national resources such as the Jefferson County schools, University of Louisville and the Nature Conservancy.

Meeting the renewal and conservation mission at Iroquois requires innovative protection strategies. As the Master Plan is implemented, Iroquois can serve as a training ground for park professionals in state-of-the-art management and maintenance techniques for public lands that are ecologically and culturally significant.

# Illustrative Master Plan for Cherokee Park



## Renewing Cherokee Park

Frederick Law Olmsted designed Cherokee Park, in his words, "to preserve a beautiful sample of the celebrated 'bluegrass country' of Kentucky. It is assuredly one of the most beautiful parks in this country." The park is Olmsted's most purely scenic design and its view from Barringer Hill was one of America's greatest Olmstedian vistas before the tragic tornado of 1974.

The Master Plan shows how we can:

- Renew Cherokee's pre-tornado character by rehabilitating the great vista from Barringer Hill across Beargrass Creek to Cochran Hill. Replacing invasive plants with natives throughout the park will reopen significant sightlines and improve the visitor's sense of comfort. Several "Great Groves of Kentucky" will define vistas and create shady picnic areas.
- Construct the Barringer Hill multi-use path to provide access to interior parklands and woodlands that meets the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The one-mile paved circuit will offer visitors wayside shelters, rustic footbridges over Beargrass Creek and Barringer Springs, connections to bridle and other trails and signage telling the story of the park.
- Build a new open-air shelter at the Barringer Hill Overlook in the rustic style of its predecessor. The design will incorporate existing restrooms, a fireplace for winter sledders and a ranger station.
- Enhance habitats. Projects include a wildflower trail along Beargrass Creek, stabilizing the creek banks, enriching the shoreline to improve the fishery at Willow Pond and converting turf to meadow.
- Upgrade infrastructure. Renovate and expand athletic complex atop Bonnycastle Hill near Hogan's Fountain, as recreational facilities currently located elsewhere in the park become outdated over time. Restore bridges to better withstand flooding, provide parallel parking and expand parking lots and dress road edges. A one-way traffic loop with recreational lane would help balance recreational and vehicular uses.

As with the entire Olmsted system, renewing Cherokee Park requires taking a long view, working steadily and using the Master Plan as a road map to bring about changes that add up over time. Volunteer work programs will be an essential part of restoring the woodlands and managing the trail system.

## Renewing The Parkway

The parkways are the linking feature that defines Louisville's Olmsted system; without them the city would not have grown as it did.

The Master Plan shows how we can:

- Link the parkways to one another and downtown. While Olmsted's original intention was not realized, it is still valid today. It can be accomplished by knitting together connecting city streets with standard lighting, signage, tree planting and greensward.
- Adapt the parkways for multiple uses, providing recreational quality for pedestrians, joggers and bicyclists.
- Establish a formal review process. The various local parties involved in construction along the parkways should be guided and coordinated by a formal review process.
- Educate abutting property owners. Landowners and residents need to be informed of parkway rights and responsibilities, in conjunction with a general program designed to heighten awareness that the parkways are historically important and should be preserved.
- Provide continual maintenance, remedial care and replacement of approximately 6,000 trees.
- Take a consistent approach to signage, lighting, sidewalks and other common elements.

## Guidelines for a Sustainable Landscape

A crucial challenge for the Louisville Olmsted Parks is the need to develop new approaches to managing the landscape that restore historic character while sustaining and enhancing the integrity and diversity of the natural settings. Each park area has been designated as a landscape cover type that reflects the original Olmsted design as well as current ecological conditions.

In addition, detailed specifications are provided for all facets of landscape management, from gully stabilization to trail monitoring, exotic species control to planting and mulching and from streambank enhancement to vista management.

The following principles describe processes and principles that must be integral to the landscape management program:

- The process should be participatory and inclusive, from decision-making to implementation.
- All actions should be monitored and assessed, making periodic modifications.
- Life-cycle costing should be initiated at every level.
- Highest priority should be given to those natural and cultural features that cannot be replaced.
- Incorporate restoration of the function, structure and composition of natural systems into all aspects of management.
- Native plants should be used throughout the parks, not just in natural areas.

This Master Plan blends ecological restoration with historic preservation to recapture the "genius" of each place that originally inspired the parks and that is still the shared vision of today. Renewing the Olmsted Parks will only succeed as we rebuild a community-based ethic of care and vision—"stewardship"—for these treasured public landscapes.

## *Guidelines for the Built Landscape*

Three principles for built elements must be considered to achieve a balanced solution: (1) historic precedent and value; (2) respect for natural resources, harmony, function, diverse use, safety, durability and maintainability; and (3) universal access. Some may have more importance than others in a given situation. The following are priorities for the built landscape.

- Restore park infrastructure of drives, drainage and utilities to full function and take a consistent approach to maintenance and renewal.
- Make park and parkway circulation systems more accessible and safer for all park users—walkers, runners, bicyclists, as well as drivers.
- Provide for diverse park uses and resolve conflicts.
- Reorganize park use zones to relate to historic character and natural systems, so that passive and active recreation can coexist without conflict. This will require the phased relocation of some active recreational facilities.
- Accommodate vehicular access and use of the parks without degrading natural and historic features, or park character.
- Renew the character of the parkways and provide multi-use ways throughout.

## *Implementing the Master Plan*

To fulfill its mission, the program for renewal must meet these goals:

- Build an ethic of stewardship for the public landscape as a community-based partnership.
- Integrate ecological restoration and historic preservation to shape the future vision.
- Upgrade the staff and expertise of Metro Parks to bring skills and resources to managing the living and built landscapes.

An Advisory Committee will monitor implementation of this plan and evaluate new projects and proposals. Its composition should represent the Stewardship Council, Metro Parks Advisory Commission, Metro Parks Planning and Design Division, Metro Parks field staff, the Louisville Friends of Olmsted Parks, and the Conservancy's Master Planning Committee. All projects generated by the Master Plan are subject to the approval of the Director of Metro Parks.