CHAPTER SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This park could be wondrous! How can we make it happen?
- Survey comment

Riverside Park is a gem that needs to be improved and expanded. The community needs more and better access to the riverfront for recreating and enjoying nature.
- Survey comment

People in the nearby community already recognize the value of Riverside Park. The park is a place where they can seek respite from city life, relax, and enjoy views of the Detroit River. There is also widespread recognition, however, that the park is not meeting some of the current needs of users. The lack of basic facilities and concerns about safety make it difficult for residents to take full advantage of this unique setting. The challenge in revitalizing Riverside Park is to devise solutions that not only address these concerns, but also accentuate the park’s special qualities.

In addition, the success of Riverside Park depends on collaboration. The park’s revitalization cannot fall solely on the City of Detroit. While the city’s involvement is essential, its resources remain limited. Even if this were not the case, the success of revitalization efforts would still hinge on the degree of community support for the park. Encouraging responsibility to be shared between the city and the community increases the potential for long-term success and the likelihood that community needs will be met.

Fortunately, there are many available resources in the community, including a tremendous amount of human capital and goodwill. Survey respondents have indicated a strong willingness to volunteer just as several community organizations have expressed an interest in holding more events there. These findings hold great promise for the future of Riverside Park, but attention must also be paid to helping individuals feel more comfortable visiting the park. Our recommendations, therefore, are aimed at addressing residents’ concerns while simultaneously building a stronger relationship between the park and the people of nearby neighborhoods.

In the next few sections we offer a set of recommendations to address the most prominent issues for the park including comfort (physical safety, cues of safety, and basic needs), amenities, and building community ownership. While organized according to these themes, it is important to note that many of our recommendations address multiple concerns.
Physical safety: The threat of physical danger is a major concern for many community members. Assuaging this concern and ensuring safety will encourage more people to use the park.

- **Close the security gate at dusk.** Nighttime activity not only adds to people’s perception that the park is unsafe but it also generates a significant amount of litter. Although at one time the gate was closed each evening, this no longer occurs. If the city of Detroit were to close the gate each night, cars would not be able to access the park after dark.

- **Increase police presence.** While police do patrol the park, visits are infrequent and brief, typically lasting about five minutes. Patrolling the park more frequently (and at unpredictable times) may deter illegal activities while increasing the comfort of park visitors. In addition, police may be able to engage with park visitors to help foster a sense of community in the park. Since the police cannot be present at all times, it is important to create the perception that the park is regularly monitored. Posting a sign that indicates that police patrol the area, and that gives people a number to call with complaints, may also help achieve this result.

- **Add security lighting.** Providing night lighting will increase the visibility of activities in the park, discouraging illegal activities and allowing visitors to assess whether they want to enter the park.

- **Install emergency phones.** Emergency phones can address physical security concerns by deterring criminal behaviors, and giving visitors the confidence that help is reachable.

- **Make the promenade railing childproof.** The renovation of the promenade brought with it the installation of a railing along the riverfront. However, the current configuration does not prevent small children from accessing the river’s edge. This places a significant burden on families and community organizations who must watch after more than a few children.
Cues of safety: The appearance of the site can lead people to think it is not safe or cared for. Addressing these issues can give the sense that the park is cared for and under close community watch.

- **Address littering problem.** Litter is a major problem at the park. Furthermore, the presence of litter reinforces the sense that littering is acceptable. While most litter is generated through nighttime activities, it also occurs during the day. While trash receptacles are available in high-use areas, their inconspicuous color may reduce their use. Proper trash disposal could be encouraged in a number of ways that not only discourage litter, but also create the feeling that the park is special. For example, children involved in neighborhood community organizations could paint anti-litter messages on signs or trash cans. In addition, volunteer clean-up days could be regularly scheduled in between the city’s usual maintenance days.

- **Improve park’s entrance and repave parking lot.** The entrance to the park lies at the junction of two streets and a set of railroad tracks, making it difficult to see from the main approach along West Grand Boulevard. Ideally, the layout of the entrance would be changed. Until the resources are found to make that happen, the problem could be partially addressed by moving existing signs to a more prominent location. In addition, the parking lot is currently potholed and poorly drained. In the short term, potholes could be temporarily filled; however, plans should be made to redesign the parking lot with improved drainage.

Basic Needs: The lack of basic facilities is a significant barrier for families and people wishing to use the park for an extended period.

- **Install bathrooms.** The park’s isolated location makes accessing bathrooms difficult. While permanent bathrooms were highly desired by interviewees and survey respondents, the resources required to build and maintain such facilities are limited. At the least, portable bathrooms should be provided during periods of high use, and a more permanent solution should be found.

- **Install water fountain.** Drinking water is a need of park users, particularly in the summer. Having access to water would make visiting the park more comfortable for
families with small children, individuals who spend significant time there, and individuals who use the park to exercise.

- **Provide shelter.** Shelter is necessary to protect park users on hot summer days and encourage extended use. The current lack of shelter forces people to seek respite in their cars, giving the impression that the park is either not occupied or full of people who do not want to be seen. The addition of shade trees, gazebos and/or park shelters would help to meet this need.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Amenities:</th>
<th>Currently park visitors are limited in what they can do at the park. Improvements are needed that both facilitate a greater variety of activities and enhance Riverside’s unique features.</th>
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- **Provide more and different types of seating.** Seating in the park is currently concentrated along the riverfront promenade. While this is an attractive location, at present there is little protection from the sun or wind. The lack of tables also makes it difficult for visitors to enjoy a picnic lunch or socialize with others. Additional picnic tables and benches should be placed in locations that offer protection from the elements and/or are near areas of more intense use.

- **Add landscaping to encourage exploration.** Trees and flowers not only enhance the general appearance of the park, but also create a more interesting and complex environment. Currently, the entire park can easily be viewed from the parking lot. Plantings should not entirely hide any portion of the park, since this could present a safety risk. Instead, vegetation that partially screened views could help get individuals out of their cars and exploring the park. Provided vegetation is maintained, its addition may help visitors recognize that the park is regularly cared for.

- **Add outdoor message centers.** Outdoor message centers offer an inexpensive way of advertising events at the park, providing interpretive information, and communicating fish advisories to anglers. These signs will also give the impression that the park is actively maintained and cared for. While there may be concern about vandalism, existing signs at the park remain in good condition.
• **Renovate playscape.** In its current condition, the playground equipment at Riverside is unlikely to attract families with small children. Updating or removing older, rusting equipment and adding some new play elements could be a major attractant for families. If community members were to work together to build elements of the playscape, they would also gain a community-bonding opportunity.

• **Connect Riverside Park to Clark Park.** Residents have expressed an interest in a walking/biking path connecting Riverside to Clark Park. Though such a plan has been proposed through the Southwest Detroit Riverfront Greenway, it has not yet been implemented. A pedestrian/bike path would increase access from neighborhoods to the riverfront.

• **Install public artwork.** Southwest Detroit has a rich history of public artwork. Local artists and organizations could donate their time to create murals, sculptures, and other art forms. Artwork that captures the cultural diversity of the area as well as the features that make Riverside Park unique might be particularly appropriate.

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**Community ownership:** Creating a sense of shared responsibility gives the park a much greater chance of thriving. Building broad ownership is particularly important given the limited resources of individual organizations.

• **Hold community events at the park.** Community activities have the potential to alter negative perceptions of Riverside by introducing people to the park in a safe context. Over time these individuals may feel more comfortable visiting on their own and may even encourage friends and family to come. With more people in the park, and thus more vigilance, illegal activities are less likely to occur (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of community events).

• **Leverage local resources.** Local organizations and residents have indicated a strong willingness to volunteer their time at the park. Given the many talents, skills, and resources these volunteers offer, there is a great potential to make revitalization of Riverside Park a cooperative effort between the city and the community. For example, residents could assist with the building of a new playscape. While adults construct and lay out playground equipment, children could be involved in creating artistic accents such as handmade signs and tiles. Residents’ involvement in these
types of activities can foster a sense of pride and ownership. By feeling they have made a meaningful contribution, residents may be more likely to visit the park and value it as part of their community.

- **Encourage public participation.** If improvements and support for the park are to be sustained, then the local community must be involved in decision-making. This can range from major decisions, such as how the park should be incorporated into riverfront redevelopment plans to smaller scale decisions, such as the placement of amenities.

- **Form a community coalition to support Riverside Park.** A good starting point for getting these recommendations, and other improvements, implemented would be the formation of a community-based group to share the work. Such a coalition could set priorities, coordinate activities, and serve as liaison with the Detroit Recreation Department. We expect that it will be through the action of some form of community coalition that the first steps are taken toward revitalizing Riverside Park.

**Conclusion**

Riverside Park has not been forgotten by the people of Southwest Detroit. Community members have spoken, and they are willing to put forth the effort to reclaim this public space. We have seen glimpses of the park’s potential through our observations of community events and through the enthusiastic comments of study participants. Riverside Park can become a place where people go to relax and mentally restore from their busy lives, where families spend the afternoon picnicking, and where community members congregate for events, large and small.

Southwest Detroit possesses a remarkable amount of social capital and resources that can be used to transform Riverside Park. While the park’s revitalization will require effort, the changes required are within reach. Working together, community groups, individuals, and city staff can help Riverside become a park that is not only more valued, but also a source of great pride for Southwest Detroit. We hope our findings will be of use in that process.