

MassDEP Project #BWSC 11 NRD 01

WARD STREET PARK

15 Ward St., Salem, MA 01970

FINAL PROJECT REPORT

Submitted by

North Shore Community Development Coalition

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REPORT NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

The Ward Street Park, located in Salem, Massachusetts, is a project of North Shore Community Development Coalition (North Shore CDC), a non-profit organization also located in Salem, which invests in neighborhoods to create thriving communities. North Shore CDC identified an opportunity to transform a blighted, vacant lot in The Point neighborhood of Salem and, in partnership with the non-profit Salem Sound Coastwatch (SSC), obtained a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's Rubchinuk program to build a pocket park there. The total cost of the project was \$224,282, of which MassDEP provided \$124,533. The City of Salem contributed \$43,000 in Community Development Block Grants and \$40,000 in Community Preservation Act funds. A North Shore CDC housing affiliate, which owns the adjacent property and allowed a small section of the park to be built on its land, supplied the remaining funds.

OUTREACH

From the start, North Shore CDC was committed to soliciting input from the community for the design of the park and to keeping the neighbors informed of the park's progress. Therefore, the process of designing the park was thoroughly intertwined with an extensive community engagement campaign. Please see Appendices B, C, and E for complete documentation of North Shore CDC's community engagement and notification efforts, including a detailed timeline (App. B – 00 Community Engagement Timeline).

Outreach began on January 8, 2014, with a meeting aimed at residents and businesses living and operating in the immediate vicinity of the property. Dozens of flyers (App. B – 140102 Abutters Mtg. Flyer) were left at individual apartments and posted at local businesses well in advance. Food and child care were offered. However, it was a bitterly cold evening and only one person attended.

As the next step, North Shore CDC presented three possible park concepts – Garden, Plan, and Plaza – at a meeting of The Point Neighborhood Association on January 27, 2014. See Appendix B – 140127 Ward Street Landscape Posters and 140218 – Community Engagement Update. For this meeting, North Shore CDC distributed 200 bilingual flyers throughout the community (App. B – 140117 Neighbor Letter and 140117 PNA Flyer). About 12 attendees voted for favorites and gave a strong indication that they would like to see a combination of the Play and Garden concepts.

To elicit the views of a broader cross-section of the neighborhood and to get more detailed input, the North Shore CDC community engagement staff conducted a detailed, face-to-face survey by knocking on doors and talking to people on the street in May 2014. This process resulted in the completion of 13 surveys. See Appendix C for survey questions and results. The results of the survey were mixed. However, a desire for some sort of active space emerged, and half the respondents requested basketball specifically.

For more in-depth discussions of the park design and to provide more focus on design details, North Shore CDC formed a Resident Advisory Group (RAG) consisting of 6 people living in the neighborhood and one local business owner. See Appendix B – 00 Community Engagement Timeline and 140617 Ward St. Community Engagement – for the composition of the group and details of its meetings.

At the first meeting of the RAG on June 10, 2014, the landscape architect presented the concepts of Garden, Plaza and Play with the added refinement of an Active Garden space to reflect the views which had been expressed to date by the community at the January PNA meeting and in the May survey. The meeting concluded with overall support for the Active Garden concept with the possibility of basketball.

At the next RAG meeting on June 25, 2014, the landscape architect presented one plan with a smaller, curved play space with a large garden area and another plan with a large, square play space with a smaller garden.

The group chose the one with the larger play space to allow for a basketball hoop and requested lots of color. The architect did not provide North Shore CDC with permanent copies of these options, but Karen Pelto of MassDEP was present at the meeting.

On July 21, 2014, the RAG met for the third and final time. See Appendix B – 140718 Final Presentation to Advisory Group - for the plans and views presented at this meeting, all variations of the square basketball space with gardens on the perimeter. Based on the discussion at this meeting, the architect modified the plan slightly (App. B: 140724 Conceptual Plan Post-Advisory Group), and the modified plan formed the basis for the construction drawings included in the RFP for the park's construction.

DESIGN

The original goal of the project was to create an open green space in the most densely built and populated neighborhood of the city. It was thought that a green space would benefit both the residents and the environment, providing a tranquil space for rest and relaxation while cleaning the air, cooling the earth, and limiting storm water runoff. However, the neighbors overwhelmingly, although not unanimously, favored an active play space for the area's children and youth, with a garden as an enhancement but not the main feature. The two parks already existing in and near The Point were not meeting the need.

Also, through the community engagement process, North Shore CDC learned that the Ward Street youth had already co-opted the space by cleaning it up, installing a portable basketball hoop, and painting lines on the dangerously uneven asphalt. In fact, the lot had been vacant ever since the great fire of 1914, and an elderly member of the RAG could remember playing there (and breaking her arm) as a child. Less advantageous for the neighborhood as a whole, the space had also been used recently by adult males playing dominoes and drinking in public. In other words, the space had been more than a magnet for trash; it had served as a gathering and play space for decades, in spite of its unsafe retaining wall, ugly Jersey barriers, and generally blighted condition.

To convert the lot at 15 Ward Street to a garden would have made many residents feel as though the powers-that-be were taking something valuable away from them and giving them something they did not want in its place.

The president of The PNA, a woman considered by many neighbors to be their spokesperson, was especially adamant about including basketball in the design.

The neighbors' desire for active play space created a design goal that was difficult to reconcile with the original intent of the Rubchinuk grant, largely because of the limited size of the property. The challenge was to allow adequate space for both play and gardens, while protecting the gardens from damage due to human activity. North Shore CDC settled on a plan which used fencing and benches to separate the different uses. The final plan was designed to meet the following goals:

- a space for informal, non-regulation basketball activity, and other physical activity, such as games and riding, which could also be used for social gatherings
- a place largely outside the basketball court in which younger children could run and ride
- seating for both participants and observers, including an area for people to rest while physically protected from rigorous activity, but none that could be used for sleeping
- low-maintenance, drought-tolerant gardens that would beautify the area without providing cover for illicit activities
- lighting to improve security and discourage illicit activities
- shade where there had been none
- grading and drainage to minimize storm water runoff.

Appendix G contains most of the plans that were considered, including the original concepts, plans presented to the RAG, and the final plans and drawings included in the RFP for park construction.

CONSTRUCTION

North Shore CDC completed construction of the park in two phases. In the summer of 2014, it rebuilt the top two thirds of the twelve foot high retaining wall which was supporting the property. North Shore CDC hired a structural engineer to design the new wall and to oversee its construction.

The retaining wall had been condemned by the City and presented a danger to the children playing in the vacant lot. The blocks in one corner of the wall were loose, and the whole wall was significantly out of plumb. The chain link

fence on top of the wall was dangerously weak or damaged in several places. For these reasons, the City had placed Jersey barriers along the street side of the property to prevent people from parking their cars there. See Appendix H for before and after photos of the retaining wall.

The second phase of construction, the park itself, was completed in July of 2015. See Appendix K for the park RFP, including detailed specifications; Appendix G contains the drawings. See Appendix I for before and after photos of the park. The North Shore CDC project managers provided general oversight of the park's construction, but the landscape architect supervised plant placement and reviewed and approved structural components, including elevations, grading and drainage.

A major question presenting itself during both phases of construction was whether potentially contaminated, historic fill would have to be removed from the site to make room for new materials brought in to rebuild the retaining wall and to create the gardens and paved surfaces. Disposal of such soil would be a complex and expensive task requiring the services of an environmental engineering firm. During the excavation for the rebuilding of the wall, sufficient rubble (concrete, brick, stone, boulders, lumber) was removed to eliminate the need for soil disposal during that phase of construction.

However, for the park to be constructed, North Shore CDC had to dispose of 42 tons of soil in a manner compliant with environmental regulations. An environmental engineering firm was engaged to plan and to manage the process of removing the soil and transporting it to an appropriate facility in New Hampshire. The cost to remove and dispose of the soil was approximately \$8,000, including the engineering fees.

MONITORING AND OVERSIGHT

Even before construction of the park was fully completed in the summer of 2015, neighborhood children began playing there. The area had been closed for safety reasons during all of the previous summer, and the children had resorted to playing in the street. When the new space became available, they flocked to it immediately.

From that moment to this day, the park has seen an extraordinary amount of activity, and it has been utilized in most of the ways for which it was

designed. Young children run or ride bikes and scooters on the path behind the basketball fence. Older children and adults play basketball and use the two benches inside the basketball fence to rest and socialize. Others sit on the three benches outside the basketball fence to relax, socialize, or watch the people playing. Sometimes, a supervised, pre-school group will come in the morning to use the open space for unstructured play. In the evenings, people of all ages are playing or socializing in and around the park.

Unfortunately, in spite of the 8 foot high basketball fence, the gardens suffered as a result of all this activity, and changes had to be made. The ground cover which had been planted between the basketball court and the public sidewalk virtually disappeared. It was eventually replaced with 5 steel planters and a new bench, all of which matched the existing purple benches and trash barrel and so added even more color. In addition, a 4 foot high fence was installed between the basketball court and the public sidewalk to protect the planters and to prevent balls from rolling into the street. Neighbors had begun requesting the additional fence for safety reasons soon after the park was constructed.

The original garden plans called for two types of grasses in addition to the ground cover, but one of the grasses was not available. Russian sage was planted instead, but it was too brittle to hold up well against errant balls and the humans chasing them. The following summer, the surviving sage was replaced with tall grasses that produce golden flowers throughout the summer, visible in the After Photos in Appendix I.

Some individual plants that flourished last summer did not come back this summer, and it was determined that pet urine during the winter and spring was probably the culprit. The afflicted area has been closed off with a sign saying "No Pets Please," and many of the grasses are recovering. Others, however, will require replacement.

Clematis vines were planted this summer along the rear chain link fence between the new, taller grasses to disguise the fence and to add some color. The vines and new grasses will increase the height of the gardens and augment their visual impact, especially as they mature over the next couple of growing seasons. There are some spots in the original garden areas where nothing will grow due to human foot traffic, and stepping stones are being laid there to improve the appearance.

The honey locust shade tree planted near the public sidewalk has been

carefully monitored and tended by the project managers. Human tomfoolery has resulted in the loss of some lower branches, but they have been properly pruned and the tree is thriving, even in the current drought. The trunk has been wrapped to discourage keying. The lilac tree located toward the rear of the park bloomed beautifully this year, and it is thriving also.

To accommodate the changes to the gardens, the project managers had the irrigation system reconfigured. It is working smoothly, and all of the plants are well hydrated. Many of the fountain grasses have begun flowering, and they will provide a good show later in the summer.

Members of the North Shore CDC YouthBuild program built an information kiosk which was installed last summer near the public sidewalk. The back side of the kiosk has not been marred by any graffiti, and it is available for future public art.

The park is under video surveillance. The northeast corner of the park, located under the lilac tree, is lighted at night by a bollard on a timer. Another fixture operates on a motion sensor to light the basketball court. Both lights are low and intended to discourage illicit activities, not to encourage use of the park after dark, when it is officially closed. To date, there has been no substantial vandalism or graffiti.

The North Shore CDC project managers have monitored the condition of the park daily since its completion in July 2015 and have taken the actions noted above to adapt the design of the park to the reality of its utilization. Now they are making preparations to hand off the care of the park to the North Shore CDC property management division.

FOLLOW UP COMMUNITY SURVEY

With the help of high school students enrolled in a summer program at Salem State University, North Shore CDC's community engagement staff recently conducted a survey of the neighborhood to assess the outcome and benefits of the park. See Appendix D for the survey questions and resulting data.

The results of the survey are very encouraging and are consistent with what the project managers have experienced when spending time in the park and in the neighborhood. For each question, the majority of respondents answered positively, supporting the conclusions that basketball is a good use

of the space and that parents feel comfortable letting their children play there. A majority also expressed a willingness to participate in community events held at the park, even to the extent of bringing and/or purchasing food. North Shore CDC is hoping to offer some programming in the park, and several of the questions were aimed at determining the level of community interest.

The problems identified in the survey are also mostly consistent with what the project managers have heard. It sounds as though one respondent kept giving the “negative influences” comment and is concerned about either the types of people or the types of activity taking place in the park.

Occasionally, there is drinking late at night, and police have been called. Sometimes in the evenings, adult males take over the court. However, North Shore CDC has received very few complaints overall.

Most of the comments have been very positive. The many people who use the basketball court enthusiastically proclaim it was the best thing the CDC could have done. Others appreciate the greenery, flowers, and colorful furnishings as well as having a place to sit and socialize, observe, or even wait for a ride. North Shore CDC will closely monitor the activity there to assure that the park continues to provide an overwhelmingly positive impact on the surrounding community.