

# OVERTON PARK

# notes

fall 2023

## Enhancing a gem: changes coming to Overton Park

Over the past few years, Overton Park Conservancy has been gathering feedback from the community about how the park fits into their lives, and their vision for its future. Time and again, we heard that the park and its amenities are beloved, and visitors want to protect them. Their desire is to deepen their connection with the park, with nature, and with the people they meet along the way.

Now, we are excited to share with you some of the fruits of this process. The plan for Overton Park's future focuses on fine-tuning the park's key elements and strengthening its core offerings. By celebrating the park's history, and by expanding its ecological and programmatic diversity, we can help Overton Park reach its fullest potential. The plan includes a series of thoughtful interventions designed to increase engagement and improve the park's financial sustainability without dramatically changing its character.

While we'll be making improvements throughout the park, the plan focuses on major enhancements to the Greensward, the heart of the park (the park's geographic center, including Rainbow Lake), and the newly-available acreage in the southeast corner.

### **The Greensward**

It's a project years in the making: next year, overflow parking on the Greensward will permanently come to an end. In the process, Memphis Zoo visitors will



Memphis Zoo board chair Jerry Shore, Zoo President & CEO Matt Thompson, Congressman Steve Cohen, Mayor Jim Strickland, Conservancy Executive Director Tina Sullivan, and Conservancy board chair Yancy Villa celebrate the \$3 million federal allocation to the Greensward parking solution.

gain an improved parking experience, park visitors will gain an enhanced experience of the park's central gathering space, and the Old Forest will gain back nearly 17 acres.

Thanks to a \$3 million federal appropriation secured by Congressman Steve Cohen, the Conservancy, the Zoo, and the City of Memphis are moving into the next phase of implementing the parking solution. The Zoo has begun moving its maintenance functions into a section of the park's southeast corner, which will free up its

current maintenance area for a new parking lot. When that lot opens, Greensward parking will end forever. The City of Memphis has consulted turf experts regarding remediation of the soil in the area used to park cars. With aeration and a few seasons of being car-free, this area will become less compacted.

When talking with the community about what they would like to see for a fully-accessible Greensward, we heard that keeping the lawn's character and openness were critical, but that more shaded seating areas and a dedicated walking path would make the space even more usable. The plan calls for a tree-lined path around the Greensward's curving perimeter, with picnic tables and a small entrance plaza. The trees will provide a visual barrier between the Greensward and the Zoo parking lot, and the path will make the full space usable to visitors who may not be able to traverse the full expanse of lawn.

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The current northern edge of Rainbow Lake, and a vision of a naturalized edge and boardwalk trail (illustration by Design Workshop).

## Heart of the Park

In George Kessler's original design for the park, Rainbow Lake was planned to be 1.95 acres, with a softly planted edge and a pedestrian path on the west side. Today the lake is 1.61 acres with a hard edge, and its shallowness and concrete lining create algae blooms that cause constant maintenance challenges. Our plan calls for rehabilitating the lake, restoring natural ecological features and plantings, and connecting it to a trail and a new pavilion that will replace the current structure. Naturalizing the lake would also help to mitigate some of the flooding we frequently experience on this side of the park.

The proposed nature pavilion would provide a space for interactive nature-based learning, serving as an open-air outdoor classroom. Programming within the space would be flexible enough for all ages and could support paid events, generating revenue without making the park feel commercialized.

Where Rainbow Lake is now separated from the Old Forest by a fence and the Zoo's temporary exhibit space, we will link these two areas via a new "discovery trail." This trail will feature multiple informal, self-paced opportunities to explore the natural beauty

of Rainbow Lake, Lick Creek, and the Old Forest. One learning node might sit under the forest canopy, offering a look at Lick Creek; another might offer a look into the lake via a raised boardwalk. Interpretive signage could be added to make the ecological features of Overton Park feel within visitors' reach.

To the eastern edge of the discovery trail lie the nearly 17 acres of old-growth forest that are currently fenced and off-limits to the public. This area has no existing trail system, and is largely overgrown with invasive plants. The Conservancy will use funding from the federal appropriation to do a large-scale invasive removal, which we'll then maintain through our robust program of volunteers. When the initial removal has taken place, we'll install trails so that the native vegetation has a chance to thrive without being trampled. After that, we look forward to bringing down the fence and welcoming you into this new section of managed forest.

## Southeast Corner

Used as a City maintenance facility for the past century, the acreage at the corner of Poplar Ave. and East Parkway provides an opportunity to try some new things without making huge changes in the parts of the



The current northern edge of the Greensward, and a vision of a walking trail, seating areas, and additional plantings (illustration by Design Workshop).

park that are already beloved. The planning process generated interesting ideas for activating this corner, but it's been challenging to develop a community vision for a space that most park visitors have never been able to visit. Now that the City's maintenance functions have relocated to a new facility, we're excited to show you this new corner of the park!

Over the next few months, we'll be testing out some concepts, similar to recent activations like 2014's "Tennessee Brewery Untapped" and 2010's "A New Face for an Old Broad." We're focusing on one of the existing greenhouse bays and the area just surrounding it. First, we'll bring the community out for a series of cleanup events, to remove clutter and overgrown vegetation. Then, we'll work with partners to bring out musical events (like the Overton Park Shell's Mobile Shell stage), pop-up food and drink options, games, and other ideas. This will be a time to visit a space that's entirely unfamiliar to most Memphians and dream about what we want to see and do there in the future.

## Other Areas of the Park

The first phase of the park's transformation is already complete, with 2022's opening of the reimagined Overton Park 9. For the next phases, we've focused here on the three areas of the park where we expect significant improvements, but other sections will get some needed TLC as well.

The East Parkway Pavilion and picnic area is well-loved and well-used. We heard from you that it doesn't need a major reimagining, but it does need investment. The historic pavilion needs extensive repairs, including a new roof and flooring. Playground equipment would be replaced, and the walking path surrounding it could be enhanced by the addition of sculptural elements.

Veterans Plaza would receive more shade trees and seating. The section of Museum Drive between the Overton Park Shell and Brooks Museum would

be turned into a pedestrian plaza with space for food trucks, picnic tables, and an elevated view of the Shell stage. Improved seating and pathways would be added to the formal gardens.

We're thrilled to continue strengthening our relationship with all our partner organizations in the years to come. It's been a joy co-hosting events with the Brooks Museum and Overton Park Shell recently, and we're planning to add even more shared programming in the next year to include the Memphis Zoo and the OP9 golf course. The Metal Museum will begin construction on Rust Hall soon, and we can't wait to welcome them to the park. The Brooks Museum will be with us for a few more years before moving downtown, and a process to identify the future use of the museum buildings will begin in 2024.

We're grateful to everyone who spent time sharing their ideas for the park over the last few years, and we hope you'll be excited about the changes to come. We've already begun implementing some of the changes you asked for, including this year's launch of environmental education and creative programming. We'll need your continued support, both in shaping the future of the southeast corner and in financially contributing to these plans, and we'll have lots of creative ways for you to get involved.

Special thanks are due to the funders who supported this planning process: The Assisi Foundation of Memphis, City of Memphis, Community Foundation of Greater Memphis, First Horizon Foundation, Hohenberg Foundation, Hyde Family Foundation, International Paper, Bill Metz, and Reimagining the Civic Commons.

We look forward to sharing even more about the vision for Overton Park in the months to come!



Sign up at [www.overtonpark.org/email](http://www.overtonpark.org/email) for updates and volunteer opportunities!



The current greenhouse bay in the southeast corner, and a vision of a Greenhouse Café and lawn (illustration by Design Workshop).

## For Ann Coleman, a place of solace in the city

Longtime Overton Park supporter Ann Coleman has been making memories at the park for her entire life. From Saturday mornings watching animals at the Zoo as a child to magical moments of discovery on the forest trails as an adult, she's watched the park grow and change over decades. And as a member of Overton Park Conservancy's Poplar Society, Ann has chosen to remember Overton Park in her will so that future generations can write their own stories in Overton Park.

We sat down with Ann recently to talk about some of her favorite park memories.

"On Saturday mornings, my dad would put on what he called his 'blue suede Zoo shoes' and take us to the Zoo. My father was 45 when I was born, and I never saw him in anything other than a three-piece suit. We would always go to the Zoo and get on all the little rides outside the old exhibits. Just the other day, I went back to where the little boat rides are and they looked so small compared to what I remembered!"

Growing up in East Memphis, Ann and her high school friends eventually began making the drive west to hang out at the park. "I played guitar, and there was always a group of people that would sit on the Greensward under the old magnolia trees back there. When I was a teenager, we'd randomly show up and there'd be people playing music. We'd drive over at

night and park at Rainbow Lake and tell ghost stories about the Lady of the Lake."

Eventually, Ann settled in Midtown, and in 2014 she moved to a house right across from Overton Park. She retired from her faculty position in physical therapy at UTHSC just before COVID hit, and like many park



neighbors, she spent the early days of the pandemic finding comfort in the park.

"During that time, I walked at the park twice a day, every day it was possible to walk," she says. "For some reason, up until that time I never went into the unpaved forest trails; I remember when cars could drive on the paved loop that I walk now. It may be my imagination, but in 2020 we had the most beautiful fall I can remember. I ran across these incredible mushrooms while walking in the forest, and it was just this little gift: you're not looking for anything and then there's this beautiful thing."

When COVID put planning for the future on her radar, she decided to add a provision to her will that would support the Conservancy's care of the park. "The park saved my sanity during that time, so it was on my mind," she says. "I just think Overton Park is a place of solace in the world. And a convenient place of solace! It's amazing that this forest is as forest-like as it is in the middle of a city."

We thank Ann for her time and generosity! To learn more about gift planning with the Conservancy, visit [www.overtonpark.org/poplarsociety](http://www.overtonpark.org/poplarsociety).



The jack-o-lantern mushrooms Ann encountered in 2020.



Ann with her father and brother at the Zoo.

## OP9 hosts a record number of rounds

The reimagined Overton Park 9 has been a huge success, hosting five times the number of golfers per month as it did in its final season before renovation. And now that the clubhouse has reopened, complete with a brand-new pro shop, the course has even more to offer visitors.

From April to September of 2020, the Links at Overton Park hosted an average of 650 rounds per month. In the first three months after the course reopened as Overton Park 9, that average jumped to over 2,200 rounds per month. This summer, that number climbed even higher, with an average of over 3,350 rounds per month. September's total climbed to 3,540, making it the busiest month yet on the course.

Rounds have included weekly youth matches, special tournaments, and alumni outings. The Overton Park Junior Open, held in July, brought 200 golfers



Personalized bricks will soon be installed in this walkway.

aged 8-17 to OP9 for match play. And in October, the course hosted night golf, illuminating four holes for a special after-dark event.

With increased play comes increased maintenance, including additional equipment, labor, and supplies. The OP9 committee has also made a significant investment in a sprinkler system and landscaping around the clubhouse. The system has been installed, and sod and mulch will be added soon.

Visitors who'd like to support the course and be a part of its landscape can purchase a brick to be installed in the walkway leading up to the clubhouse. Each 4"x8" brick is available for \$150 and can be purchased at [www.bricksrus.com/donorsite/op9](http://www.bricksrus.com/donorsite/op9). The clubhouse is also available to rent for private events; for information, visit [www.overtonpark9.org/about](http://www.overtonpark9.org/about).



Night golf was a popular offering this fall.

Remember Media

## OP9 Supporters

The following are gifts received in support of the golf course from January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2022. In-kind gifts are noted in italics. For an up-to-date list of supporters and their total giving levels, visit [overtonpark9.org/about](http://overtonpark9.org/about).

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## A year of connecting to nature and each other

Some elements of our comprehensive park plan, like naturalizing Rainbow Lake and building a new nature pavilion, will require a substantial effort and investment by many people to get off the ground. But transformational change is already happening in Overton Park, thanks to this year's launch of regular community programming that's building connections between our community and nature.

Thanks to support from The Assisi Foundation of Memphis, International Paper, and Reimagining the Civic Commons, last year we hired Dr. Malle Carrasco-Harris as our Programs Manager. In 2023, she has launched a series of programs designed to promote three goals: creative self-expression, ecophilia (curiosity and appreciation of nature and outdoor resources), and whole health (holistic well-being and

opportunities to share experiences with a diverse community). We focused on five types of events:

- **Nature education**, including a nighttime Owl Prowl, an Old Forest scavenger hunt for kids, Third Thursday Treks covering specialized ecological topics, a tree ID course, and our four-part Nature 101 series introducing visitors to birds, plants, insects, and more
- **Outreach activities**, including a service learning partnership with Compass Midtown High School that allows us to gain feedback from students and host them for regular service projects
- **Mindfulness and wellness programs**, including tai chi and yoga in the formal gardens and mindfulness walks in the Old Forest



*Pictured above, clockwise from left: Memphis Parks hosted its final Family Fun Friday of the season on the Greensward; during Spring Break Discovery Week, we hosted an animal-themed storytime; we partnered with the Brooks Museum to host a Party on the Plaza celebrating Kong Wee Pang's Summer Art Garden installation; at Nature 101, volunteers led participants on hikes introducing them to the flora and fauna of the Old Forest.*

- **Creative activities**, including nature journaling and artist-led Paint and Picnic projects
- **Fun and social activities**, including the return of our Summer Splash waterslide pop-ups and a celebration of October's NatureZen Month on the Brooks Museum plaza

To encourage a wide pool of participants, we tested different payment models, with many activities offered as pay-what-you-can. Encouraged by the Reimagining the Civic Commons goal of encouraging socioeconomic mixing through activating public space, we surveyed participants afterwards, asking them how often they participated in similar programming and whether they'd met someone new as part of the event. While nature education programming is a niche our team is uniquely positioned to fill, we found that other types of programs brought out participants who weren't otherwise engaged with the Conservancy.

This fall, we're hosting new children's ranger programs, Winter Wednesday Walks, and a Cookies and Caroling event. Look for even more new programs in 2024, including our participation in the global City Nature Challenge (a friendly competition to see which cities can record the most observations of wildlife) and a winter field day. For updates, sign up for our e-mails at [www.overtontopark.org/email](http://www.overtontopark.org/email) and keep an eye on the calendar at [www.overtontopark.org/events](http://www.overtontopark.org/events)!

Many thanks to our 2023 programming sponsors, including the sponsors of NatureZen Month: The Arbor Day Foundation, The Assisi Foundation of Memphis, Baptist Corp., Comcast, Delta Groove Yoga, Echo Systems Landscaping, Eclectic Eye, Hampline Brewing Co., Hohenberg Foundation, International Paper, Linde, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, National Environmental Education Foundation, Reimagining the Civic Commons, ServiceMaster by Stratos, and Tennessee Valley Authority.



*Pictured above, clockwise from left: instructors Amaya Shreeve and Kaci Murley led free nature journaling classes; Dr. Jason Hoeksema of the University of Mississippi was the first speaker at our new monthly Science Café happy hour; participants at Paint & Picnic enjoyed al fresco art projects in the formal gardens; and we gave away 300 Northern red oaks, red maples, and redbuds at October's community tree giveaway.*

Overton Park Conservancy gratefully acknowledges the individuals and organizations who made donations and in-kind (noted with italics) gifts from January 1, 2022 to December 31, 2022. We also thank those donors who wished to remain anonymous. If we have inadvertently omitted the name of one of our supporters, we sincerely apologize.

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## Thanks to our volunteers!



We want to thank everyone who has volunteered their time in the park this year, whether you removed invasive plants, tended the formal gardens, or picked up litter. Here, a crew from FedEx (left) repairs picnic tables and teams from Comcast and City Year (right) spread new mulch at Rainbow Lake Playground.

## Where everybody knows your smile

Several people texted and emailed me last month to ask if I'd heard about the fish fry. I was told that someone had been walking around the park handing out invitations to his home for a fish fry. And everyone went!

The invitation read, "Celebrate a Season of Walking with your Overton Park Walking Partners (Some you may know by name. Others by their smiles!)"

I can't think of a better story to capture the spirit of Overton Park. People who don't know each other's names coming together to share food and celebrate their community.

Immediately after she joined the team, I asked Dr. Malle Carrasco-Harris, our programs manager, to develop a programming mission statement to give structure and intentionality to our decision-making as we explored various programming ideas. You can read more about this on pages 6 and 7.

The fish fry story exemplifies the aspects of social connection, physical health, socioeconomic mixing, and self-expression that are already prevalent at Overton Park. Those are some of the very same goals we set for ourselves as we began to develop new programs.

Our guiding principle in creating a comprehensive plan for Overton Park, from the physical improvements to the programming to the day-to-day operation, is to nurture and celebrate what is already wonderful about this place, and to improve or enhance those areas that need a bit of help unlocking their full potential.

When it comes to Overton Park, the news just keeps getting better and better. And in a world that has its fair share of troubling, sometimes heartbreaking news, it's important to celebrate those places that bring people together with a sense of hope and a sense of community.

With the Overton Park Comprehensive Plan, we want to cultivate a place where you know your neighbors by their names, and their smiles.

### tina's message



Participants in the annual MS Walk turn the forest trails into a celebration.

*Tina Sullivan*

### staff & board

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