Weaver Park Acquisition

Weaver Park was acquired in 2002 with the assistance of a LAWCON (Land and Water Conservation Fund) grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. The grant application below notes the need for ballfields for the acquired land anticipating leased lands from the County are not secure for providing ballfields long-term.
Weaver Park Big Grove Remnant Discovery

A Park District volunteer natural areas steward was mapping the historical location of the Big Grove woodland and found historic oaks in Weaver woods that promoted a new vision for Weaver Park—a combination of active athletics recreation and natural areas at a site that could provide for multiple benefits and interests. An opportunity to recreate the historic Big Grove to savanna to prairie transition in Urbana.
Weaver Park Master Planning

A park program statement was developed reflecting a shared-use site—athletic fields combined with natural areas. The need for athletic fields included softball, baseball and soccer. At the time, preserving the woodland and restoring natural areas to the south of the woodland was the highest priority among the natural resource advocates. A wetland stormwater facility was also proposed to store/clean stormwater, provide habitat, and address flooding in Scottswood Subdivision to the east.
Initial Plan Concepts

Early planning bubble diagrams had “active” recreation in the center and “passive” natural areas around the periphery but lacked the woodland to savanna to prairie opportunity afforded by the Weaver woods oaks.
2005 Master Plan

The final master plan worked to move active ballfield recreation to the south and west to buffer the woods.

The 2005 park program called for 5 full-size, 2 medium, and 2 small soccer fields. Also, 2 softball and 1 pony baseball field.

Loop trail systems were proposed for around the park and a bicycle node off the north parking lot was proposed in hopes there would be a future Kickapoo Rail Trail opportunity to connect with the park.
Stormwater Wetland

Weaver was host to a collaborative project to address Scottswood Subdivision flooding to the east of Weaver Park, 2006-2008

- City of Urbana—Main Street drainage concerns—excess sent to basin.
- Champaign County—Nursing Home stormwater needs—parking lot sent to basin.
- Regional Planning Commission—planning assistance.
- Urbana Township—CDAP grant-eligible
- St. Joseph Drainage District #3—levy assessment for improvements within watershed.
- Urbana School District #116—school campus within watershed. Env. Education and park use opportunities.
Planting Weaver Park

Weaver Park had been in agriculture and a plan was developed to plant the park according to the 2005 master plan. Areas that were planned for ball fields would be seeded with a temporary native tallgrass cover crop. Other areas would be invested in with more diverse seed mixes.
Master Plan and Seed Mix Overlay

Park is planted according to planned use in 2010.
This study reviewed options for connecting east Urbana and Weaver Park to the Kickapoo Rail Trail. Option #4 depicted in red is the top preference among the respondents to the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission study. Baker’s lane trail is proposed to meander through the tree line on the east edge of Weaver Park connecting Washington Street with Main Street and then the KRT.
ITEP Multi-Use Trail Grant Award 2023

Based on the Connectivity Study, the City of Urbana submits and is awarded a grant for trail development along the east side of Weaver Park that will also connect with the future Health & Wellness Facility in Prairie Park and neighborhoods to the south through a sidewalk to trail expansion on the north side of Washington Street.
Prairie Park Health & Wellness Center
As the need for indoor recreation space grows, the Urbana Park District’s Strategic Plan established a goal of expanding indoor recreation space in the district. The Park District engages with Farnsworth on a site suitability analysis and Prairie Park is the top choice. The 2019 Master Plan for Prairie Park includes the new facility and some community-preferred outdoor amenities.
County purchases downtown County Plaza building, relocating Brookens offices (2022)

With the loss of Prairie Park ballfields to the new facility and the uncertainty of leased Brookens soccer fields, the Urbana Park District begins the process of updating the 2005 Weaver Park and 2019 Prairie Park Master Plans. The current lease at Brookens is through 2026.
Community Input

In order to evaluate how athletic and recreation needs in 2023 differ from 2005, the UPD sends survey notifications out via email, social media, and the park district website to district program participants and Urbana School District households. Focus groups are conducted for general recreation and athletics use.

Focus Groups Summary

On February 20th and 27th, Farnsworth Group facilitated focus groups designed to discuss needs and opportunities at Weaver and Prairie Parks. The February 20th focus group concentrated on diamond and rectangular athletic field facilities, and the February 27th focus group participants represented general recreation interests. Five questions were used to facilitate conversation in both groups:

1. What do you like about Weaver Park, Prairie Park, Brookins Fields, and Canaday Park as they are now?
2. What concerns about the parks do you have as they are now? What would you like to change?
3. What activities, programs, or events do you like at other parks that you would like to see here?
4. What amenities or facilities are not currently offered, but should be?
5. Who or what groups of people are underserved in the park complex? How could the park district be more welcoming?

Individual responses and themes are provided below. Scans of original documents are provided in the project’s OneDrive folder.
Habitat Considerations

Recognizing Weaver Park is providing much more habitat than it did in 2005 when it was a farm field with a remnant woodland, planners sought data and feedback on the park’s most critical habitat areas and functions.
Natural Areas Inventory and Mapping

Planners work with birding representatives and district’s natural areas advisory committee to identify protection priorities. Top priority is the wetland, lowest priority is area of former cover crop planting.

Focus Group comments about birds—later confirmed and marked up for future planning and protection priorities.

Natural Areas Advisory Committee notes on habitat zones—becomes basis of priority protection areas.
Early Plan Concepts

Early concepts are informed by the athletic and recreation priorities in 2023 and expected trends. Soccer remains a high need as existing fields lack investment due to leased status. New plans call for a reduction in field space from the 2005 plan, however. New plans have a greater focus on the preservation and buffering of the wetland as the top priority, woodland still important but secondary. Cover crop area, now a low diversity prairie, is lowest priority and proposed for ballfields. Two plans have a drive through road and two do not—the road is removed from future planning—opting for less automobile focus and favoring "green over gray."
Two plans prepared for public comment—neither intended to be final

Option one has softball to the south with more wetland buffer. Soccer to the north can double as multi-purpose and event space near the pavilion. Option one has a larger dedicated multipurpose field southwest of the wetland.
Both plans are the same for the Prairie Park amenities

Prairie Park proposed to include skatepark, splashpad, pickleball, sand volleyball, and both youth & adult basketball. Weaver Park option two has soccer to south and softball to north. Lighted softball fields are further from wetland in option two. Both plans have expanded wetland footprint and more wetland buffer to the south.

WEAVER + PRAIRIE PARK MASTER PLAN
Dark Sky Lighting

Concerns regarding lighting impacts on wildlife and neighbors prompt dark sky lighting design. Dark sky athletic lighting analysis provided by Musco Lighting. Musco is active with the International Dark Sky Association.
Musco provided renderings of proposed Weaver Park softball fields

Ground view looking west on top, aerial view looking east on bottom.
Formation of Stakeholder Committee

At the Virtual Webinar on August 23, 2023, there we several comments and concerns:

- Lack of Knowledge of Plans
- Questions of why now—survey indicates general satisfaction?
- Concerns about loss of habitat, especially rare birds
- Support for athletics but not at the expense of natural areas
- Concerns if the plans address the needs of surrounding neighborhoods, schools, marginalized communities

The UPD has assembled a stakeholder committee to assist in reviewing these concerns and to have more community engagement before carrying the planning process forward.