



City of Albuquerque

Parks & Recreation Department

Timothy M. Keller, Mayor

Interoffice Memorandum

March 11, 2024

To: William Gannon, President, Netherwood Park Neighborhood Association
Cc: PRD Files
From: Dave Simon, Director, Parks & Recreation Department *DSF*
Subject: Netherwood Park nature play area concept

Summary

In 2022-2023, the Parks and Recreation Department (PRD) received citizen inquiries from residents of the Netherwood Park area regarding the possibility of adding a playground feature to Netherwood Park. After some discussion with the Board of the Netherwood Park Neighborhood Association (NPNA), PRD prepared a concept drawing for a small “nature play” area to facilitate community discussion and took public comment on the idea. After considering public comment, PRD has decided not to move forward with a play area project at this time. Ideally, action should be based on a stronger neighborhood consensus. In addition, PRD feels that the preliminary design concept, which was offered for discussion purposes, can still benefit from improvement (including refining location and features) that might address some issues raised during public comment. In addition, there is not funding for a project at this time.

Background

Netherwood Park, which was established in the early 1950s, is approximately 5.3 acres in size. The park is currently a large expanse of grass, along with trees and a few minor amenities (e.g. benches), but is otherwise undeveloped. The rolling expanse of grass, small hill/terrain features, and outstanding views make the park a delightful and revered location. The park currently supports a variety of uses, including: sitting, walking, picnicking, dog walking, running, and youth/adult sports. On Wednesday evenings during the summer months, Netherwood Park hosts a popular “food truck” event that mainly utilizes the eastern portion of the park. Netherwood Park is also known for being a popular sledding and snow play location.

The concept of a playground for Netherwood Park is not brand new; it has previously come up one or two times. This time, in order to assist the neighborhood and the general public with evaluating the idea/proposal for a playground, PRD agreed to prepare a very preliminary concept for a play area in order to facilitate public discussion.

The history and long-time management approach at Netherwood have been to maintain a mostly open, undeveloped green space. The park has successfully supported many active and passive recreational uses over the years, and there is great general appreciation in the neighborhood for that condition. PRD did not bring a pre-determined position or outcome to this process of considering a new play feature, but rather took the role of trying to facilitate a community conversation.

PRD's perspective in responding to public inquiries about a possible playground, however, was that any play feature considered for Netherwood Park would have to be appropriate to the setting; that is, quite limited in scale and integrated into the landscape as best as possible. PRD also took into account important concerns about not impacting scenic views and minimizing potential impacts on existing uses. Therefore, PRD chose to prepare, for public discussion purposes, a concept for a small play area based on "nature play" concepts. (Nature play emphasizes natural materials and unstructured experiential play instead of traditional playground structures.) This concept focused on utilizing a small area in the northwestern portion of the park at the base of the park's main hill feature.

Public Input/Discussion

PRD presented this concept at a public meeting of the Netherwood Park Neighborhood Association on January 20, 2024. Following the meeting, PRD accepted public comments for three more weeks (through February 13, 2024). Comments were submitted through the Board of the NPNA and some directly to PRD. The NPNA assisted in compiling and categorizing all comments; a summary appears below and a full record of the comments have been retained in PRD files.

A "threshold" question was raised at the public meeting on January 20, 2024, and in two written comments, regarding whether covenants or other restrictions existed that might prevent construction of a play area and/or other park development features. To answer that question, PRD contracted with a title company to conduct a records search. The record search confirmed the existence of legal covenants that accompanied the platting of the Netherwood Park neighborhood. The City Attorney's office reviewed these covenants and concluded that they do not apply to Netherwood Park itself and therefore they did not, on their own, prohibit the proposed play area.

PRD received 85 public comments on the proposed nature play area. Of the comments received, 50 commenters live within the NPNA area, 27 listed addresses outside the NPNA, and eight did not provide an address.

In general, input at the public meeting and written comments broke down into three categories: (1) **Against** any change or installing a play area, (2) **For** creation of a play area, and (3) **Ambiguous** (or, "if you are going to do it, then OK").

Opponents generally emphasized: the historic openness and undeveloped character of the park, other parks have playgrounds, the park currently supports a great deal of recreation and unstructured play, perceived conflicts between the proposed location of a new play area and existing uses, and concerns about impacts on adjacent properties (e.g. increased park use, noise, potential for more nighttime gathering, etc.)

Supporters generally emphasized: benefits of healthy play areas and activities for children and families, enhancement to safety and vigilance at the park through more use and activation, increased property values, social benefits of a new gathering space that could foster community connections, the desirability of having a play area in closer proximity to the immediate neighborhood, and the smaller scale and nature play emphasis of the concept that PRD outlined.

The summary of written comments by these categories is as follows:

- **Against:** 22 (26%)
- **For:** 61 (72%)
- **Ambiguous:** 2 (2%)

Of the 85 total commentors, 50 (60%) live within the NPNA, so the public comment reflects a strong neighborhood perspective. Of the 50 commentors with an address within the NPNA, 15 (30%) opposed the concept of the proposed play area and 35 (70%) supported the concept of the proposed play area. Of the 15 comments against the proposed play area from households within NPNA, however, four were connected to the same address. So, the total of “unique” households in opposition is actually lower (12) and the percentage in opposition is actually lower (24%) if that group is regarded as a single household. Of the six commentors who live on portions of four streets immediately adjacent to the park (Morrow Road, Schell Court, Newton Place, Princeton Drive), five opposed the play area (83%) and one supported it.

Twenty-one of 25 commentors who provided addresses outside the NPNA supported the proposed play area. (84%)

PRD received 34 written comments in support of the proposed play area concept that had mostly identical text/content (a “common letter”). While this type of comment differs from a “customized” or “originally composed” comment, these common letters express a valid position endorsing the concept of the proposed play area and 21 of these common letters were associated with addresses within the NPNA.

Commentors who live immediately adjacent to the park and/or who cited being long-time residents of the NPNA are more typically opponents of the proposed play area, while commentors who mentioned having young children are more typically supporters. But, there are also commentors who are long-time residents who raised their children in the neighborhood who oppose the play area concept, and a few commentors who are long-time residents who favor the play area concept.

Within the overall public input and discussion, there was debate about whether the opinion of people living next to the park should carry more weight on the issue. PRD respects all input when it comes to making decisions about publicly-owned parks that serve a large area and diverse constituencies. The concerns and opinions of immediate neighbors are extremely important, and PRD generally gives due consideration and weight to such input, although they must be balanced with the legitimate voices of other stakeholders. Comments from outside the immediate neighborhood may be discounted by some people as not as important as those of the immediate neighborhood, though they actually do validate the concept that the City’s parks are of interest to and serve much broader constituencies that just adjacent residents and single neighborhoods.

The level and quality of public input on this matter was high. Based just on the breakdown of public comments, there is strong support for a new play area at Netherwood Park based on perceived benefits listed above. Seventy percent of commenter support the concept—a level of support that was the same based on considering only comments from within NPNA, or all comments received. It is also clear

that NPNA residents have strong opinions on this subject. Ideally, under such circumstances, PRD would prefer to move ahead based on an even stronger neighborhood consensus.

In addition, PRD recognized some valid points raised in comments that opposed the play area concept. The most reasonable of these concerned potential impacts on existing uses from building a play area in the proposed location, such as conflicts with some existing sports as well as on winter snow play on the park's famous hill. PRD recommends that a more detailed "mapping" and characterization of existing uses should be completed prior to any decision to build a play area in the park. On that same point, PRD also believes that the preliminary design concept, which was offered just for discussion purposes, can still benefit from improvement (including re-considering location and play area features) that might address some issues raised during public comment.

Conclusion/Decision

- PRD will not move forward with a play area project at this time.
- No covenants or other land use restrictions prevent development of a playground or nature play area at Netherwood Park.
- The concept of a small, nature-based play area has support within the neighborhood, but also has passionate opposition that voiced some valid concerns.
- PRD recommends:
 - Any future decision to move ahead with a play area should be based on a stronger neighborhood consensus. This should include a formal position statement from the NPNA.
 - Existing park uses should be mapped across time and space to develop a better picture of how the park is currently utilized and enjoyed, and how a play area, or other park management actions of any kind, may affect diverse uses.
 - If any project is to be discussed further, the design of a proposed play area should be subject to further refinement, including considerations of location, size, and elements that may be different from what PRD presented in draft.
 - Adequate funding should be available for the project. No funding is available at this time. A proposed state capital outlay appropriation by the 2024 Legislature that could have been used for any type of project or improvement at Netherwood Park was vetoed.

PRD recognizes the opposition by some to the concept of a play area at Netherwood Park. PRD also remains open and willing to continued engagement and work with the neighborhood on a proposed play area and/or other park improvements that might be sought by the public.