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A PARK FOR ALL HOUSTONIANS

On June 7, 1964, businessman George Hermann stepped to the microphone at the old City Auditorium in downtown Houston and formally announced the donation of his property in South Houston for the creation of a new city park “for the benefit of the poor and the rich.”

Today, Hermann Park is visited by millions of Houstonians each year from every walk of life. They come to relax, play golf, run, fish, visit the zoo, ride the miniature train, or catch a show at Miller Outdoor Theatre. The verdant, 410-acre Park sits at the heart of Houston’s cultural district — bordering Rice University, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Houston Museum of Natural Science, and the Children’s Museum — and is just across the street from the Texas Medical Center.

Although much progress has been made, George Hermann’s dream of a park for all Houstonians remains unfulfilled. Great public spaces like Hermann Park are never “finished” — they must continually improve to meet the needs of new generations of users. To meet that challenge and look forward to the next 20 years, Hermann Park Conservancy, in partnership with Houston’s Parks and Recreation Department, commissioned a new master plan in 2015 from the world-renowned landscape architecture firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. (MVVA), based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Building on the work undertaken by the recent Centennial Campaign and a succession of historic plans, the new master plan envisions a more welcoming, dynamic, and diverse Park — one that better serves its current users and attracts a generation of new users.

MVVA’s plan proposes making improvements to 233 acres of the Park — more than half its total size. The plan reclaim 21 acres of land at the Park’s center — twice the size of Discovery Green — by replacing the current surface lots with a billy play landscape concealing an additional grade parking center. It adds 2,000 new trees and 20 miles of new and improved trails, and rejuvenates and naturalizes the 20 acres of land along Brays Bayou, including adding shade trees for bicyclists and joggers.

The master plan is guided by the goals of access, play, and nature. To achieve George Hermann’s dream of a democratic public place, the Park must invite people in, not keep them out. It must provide an integrated experience rather than a fragmented one. It must provide more opportunities for both children and adults to play. And it must remain an oasis of nature in the heart of a growing city. With your help, we can ensure that Hermann Park remains a place for all Houstonians — now, and in the future.

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Doreen Stoller  
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
1915 KESSLER PLAN
The City of Houston appointed celebrated St. Louis landscape architect and planner George Kessler as Hermann Park’s first consulting landscape architect. His plan included the “grand basin,” now McGovern Lake, and a landscaped elliptical island with a Sunken Garden, now the Mecom Fountain. Kessler had a talent for blending formal entrances with large swaths of unordered planting to create natural landscapes in an urban setting. He was able to balance open lawn areas for recreation with wooded areas that felt natural to Houston’s ecology.

1923 HARE & HARE PLAN
The Kansas City landscape architecture firm Hare & Hare added the zoo and golf course in their master plan, while incorporating the vision of Kessler’s earlier plans for Park entry and a grand basin. The zoo opened in 1924, with the original Houston Museum of Natural Science located within the zoo grounds. The Hare & Hare plan called for a wide oval drive circumventing the zoo area, establishing a clear organization for the center of the Park.

1943 COHESIVE ELEGANCE
The Park matured around a system of gently curving carriage trails flanked by oak allees, making it easy and pleasurable to move around. The curving trails both organized the Park and defined the landscape experience for those promenading or driving along them. The overall effect was a cohesive experience created by an elegant form. The zoo continued to develop within a simple oval form with the lake, Reflection Pool, and Grand Gateway united by the series of curving frames.

DETERIORATION AND COMMUNITY ACTION
The second half of the twentieth century was a period of stagnation for the Park. A large section of the Park containing ballfields was transferred to the Texas Medical Center for development. Other than Miller Outdoor Theatre, which opened in 1961, few major improvements were made, and underinvestment by the City of Houston allowed the Park to deteriorate. After decades of decline, the first organized group of Houstonians to take an active interest in Hermann Park was incorporated in 1987 as the Hermann Park Joggers, Runners, and Walkers. Soon afterwards the Friends of Hermann Park, known today as Hermann Park Conservancy, was formed with a goal to preserve, restore, and enhance Hermann Park. The group’s first charge was leading “The Heart of the Park,” a 1992 national design competition to restore, enhance, and strengthen the Park’s center.
HERMANN PARK MILESTONES

1993-2015 HANNA OLIN PLAN

To address the needs of the entire 445-acre Park, in 1993 the Conservancy commissioned a new master plan from renowned Philadelphia-based landscape architect Laurie Olin. Olin’s plan imagined a Park that was “greener and bluer,” an “urban sanctuary, alive with wonder and mystery,” and a physical realization of “equity and justice, beauty, and the delight in each other’s company.” The plan called for restoring the Park’s historic coherence and bringing life back to underutilized areas to ensure that the “exist role of Hermann Park would be celebrated.” Olin’s plan also called for enhanced vehicular access and increased stewardship.

HERMANN PARK CONSERVANCY

Since the Olin plan was adopted by City Council in 1993, Hermann Park Conservancy has raised more than $232 million in Park improvements in partnership with the Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD). Over the last 25 years the Conservancy’s responsibilities have grown to include stewardship initiatives such as reforestation and the operation and maintenance of the McGovern Centennial Gardens. In addition, the Conservancy has created programs to attract volunteers, who now contribute over 20,000 hours of maintenance support each year. The Conservancy also operates the Hermann Park Railroad, pedal boats, food services, and facility rentals to gain crucial earned income to assist HPARD in maintaining the Park.

MAJOR IMPROVEMENTS

The Conservancy has undertaken key restoration projects including the Jones Reflection Pool and McGovern Lake. In 2009 it built Lake Plaza — which includes the Kinder Station, a cafe, and the Tiffany & Co. Foundation Bridge — to provide a vibrant new public space. In 2011 it restored the Mercer Taylor Trail and built the Hill Coats Bridge to provide additional opportunities for active recreation. And in 2012, to improve access to the 70-acre natural area along Brays Bayou, it built a pedestrian underpass under MacGregor Way connecting visitors to the main body of the Park to Brays Parkland.

CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN

To mark Hermann Park’s centennial in 2014, the Conservancy launched a major capital campaign to fund a series of improvements, including the $33 million McGovern Centennial Gardens, the $5 million restoration of the Park’s historic main entrance, known as the Grand Gateway, and the renovation of the Park’s Japanese Garden and historic clubhouse. While the completion of these projects will effectively complete the project list identified in the Olin plan, there is still much to be done to complete the historic vision for the Park and respond to the evolving needs of the City.
HERMANN PARK USERS

Hermann Park is one of Houston’s most vital public parks, drawing a diverse array of visitors from every Houston zip code and from across the socioeconomic spectrum. Visitor demographics closely match Houston’s overall demographics, making the Park a microcosm of the larger city. The Park also provides a geographical connection between neighborhoods as different as the Museum District, the Texas Medical Center, and the Third Ward.

A 2016 study by Rice University, commissioned by the Conservancy, studied Park patrons and usage and found virtually no difference in usage patterns between ethnic groups (“Understanding Usership in Hermann Park,” Rice University, 2016), supporting the idea of the Park as a shared experience.

WHO USES THE PARK

The Diagram shows the racial demographics of Hermann Park (Understanding Usership in Hermann Park, Rice University, 2016).

CITY OF HOUSTON DEMOGRAPHICS

The Diagram shows the racial demographics of Houston, Texas (2015 American Community Survey 5 year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau).

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF PARK USERS

The Diagram shows the racial demographics of Hermann Park (Understanding Usership in Hermann Park, Rice University, 2016).

THE MASTER PLAN ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

To better understand how Houstonians use the Park, and what improvements they would like to see, the Conservancy undertook a two-year-long public engagement process that included consultations with numerous stakeholders and a series of well-attended public meetings. The Conservancy also gathered online comments from the Houston community through digital platforms.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Activities Program and Play

Questions and Comments:

Activities & Programs Environment Mobility

Commuters

Walking/Biking

Parking

New Feature Infrastructure

Access

Traffic

Construction

Walking/Biking

New Feature

Infrastructure

Examination

Transport/Mobility

Parking

Walking/Biking

Infrastructure

11.0%

8.7%

7.2%

5.2%

3.5%

A 24.3%

G 18.0%

M 22.6%

N 35.4%

A 24.3%

G 18.0%

M 22.6%

N 35.4%
COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Based on community feedback, the Conservancy settled on three broadly defined priorities for the new Hermann Park master plan.

1 EXPAND THE SPECTRUM OF PLAY
The Park needs a greater variety of play areas—for children, adults, and even pets.

2 INVIGORATE THE PRESENCE OF NATURE
The Park needs to preserve and add to its existing biodiversity, as well as adding more shade trees.

3 IMPROVE ACCESS & VITAL INTERNAL CONNECTIONS
The Park needs to be more accessible to the public, whether they come by car, light rail, bus, bicycle, or on foot. Within the Park itself, better connections are needed between various sections to encourage visitors to explore.

The new plan proposes a number of specific projects, all designed to fulfill George Hermann’s dream of a Park for all Houstonians.
Play is fundamental to childhood development and has been proven vital for physical, emotional and social growth. Because Hermann Park is so widely used by Houston families, it is essential to offer expanded and updated recreational opportunities throughout. The master plan envisions a new, state-of-the-art playscape built atop the central parking center that will become Houston’s premier public playground. It also calls for a reimagined Playground for All Children with improved and expanded water play area.

The master plan calls for enhanced picnic areas and party pavilions on the west side of the Park, as well as an improved drop-off area to accommodate food trucks. Two new dog parks will also be added, expanding the opportunities of play for both humans and their pets.

“Houston has very few destination playgrounds. The Conservancy should go all out on a large, new, cohesive playground with themed equipment, maybe even providing shade structures above the whole thing.”
NATURE

Ever since Frederick Law Olmsted designed New York’s Central Park in the 19th century, public parks have been valued as antidotes to the hustle and bustle of city life, a respite from the concrete jungle. Hermann Park comprises 445 acres of natural landscape, providing Houstonians an irreplaceable oasis in the middle of an increasingly built-up urban environment.

Over the 20th century, however, the Park’s natural resources have slowly been whittled away by new roadways, drainage projects, and land sales. To ensure the Park remains one of Houston’s premier public spaces, we must conserve and increase its biodiversity, especially in the 70-acre Bayou Parkland area.

While the lower channel of Brays Bayou is lined with concrete for flood control, the sedge grass of the upper channel can be enriched with wildflowers and native grasses. Ecological diversity can also be added to the paths from the bayou to the Park Center, and on the margins of McGovern Lake.

Finally, Hermann Park has a diverse and largely healthy tree canopy, which provides much-needed shade in the summer. The master plan calls for planting the next generation of tree canopy, concentrating on providing shade along roads and paths where it is most needed.

“Would like to see as much natural growth as possible, which is welcoming to wildlife.”

POST OAKS NEAR BRAYS BAYOU

EXISTING CONNECTION FROM GOLF COURSE TO BRAYS BAYOU

BRIDGETON BRIDGE PARK, BRIDGEVILLE, NC, USA
ACCESS AND CONNECTIONS

A FRAGMENTED LANDSCAPE
Despite all the improvements undertaken by the Conservancy, Hermann Park remains a work in progress. Inefficient parking lots continue to dominate the Park Center, cutting off circulation to various parts of the Park. The Bayou Parkland area remains cut off from the rest of the Park by MacGregor Way. Roads with high traffic volumes form the perimeter of the Park on all sides, creating barriers to pedestrian and bicycle access and decreasing the sense of welcome. The master plan will create new crossing points and will narrow intersections where possible. New pedestrian signals and improved crosswalks will draw more people into the Park.

STITCHING THE PARK BACK TOGETHER
This vision of Hermann Park will emphasize continuity and diversity, areas for families, areas for large events and gatherings, quiet areas for contemplation and areas where nature takes center stage, all tied together with a stronger network of pathways, bike paths and shaded driveways. Placing the Park back together with the city that surrounds it will emphasize safe and welcoming street crossings, and clear connections between the internal pedestrian and bicycle networks and those surrounding the Park.

“Hermann Park is very cut up and segmented into unusable and isolated pods, especially at the perimeter.”
**MOBILITY AND PARKING**

Visitors come to Hermann Park from all over the Greater Houston region, arriving primarily by car. Current problems with traffic and parking dramatically affect the visitor experience, and are at the top of the list of visitor concerns. Arriving at the Park can be uncomfortable, inconvenient, and even unsafe. Lines of traffic waiting to enter the central parking lots can stretch around the Park’s perimeter on a busy day. Cambridge Street is often blocked by cars waiting to enter the Park, impeding emergency traffic to the Texas Medical Center.

Arriving at the Park on foot or by bicycle can also be a challenge. Over time Hermann Park has become ringed by roadways that are difficult to cross on foot, with most carrying tens of thousands of cars every day. The Mecom Fountain traffic circle has some of the worst crash statistics in Houston. Comprehensive mobility improvements to all modes are needed to transform the visitor experience of the Park.

![Image of visitor experiences at Hermann Park](image1.jpg)

**PARKING REDISTRIBUTION**

A 2016 study by mobility consultants Nelson/Nygard found that the Park’s 2,300 parking spaces are more than enough to accommodate visitor needs on all but the busiest days, due to major inefficiencies in the central parking lots cause cars to back up on Hermann Park Drive and around the Park perimeter. The Houston Police Department (HPD) regularly enforces a one-way-only route through the Park from Caroline Street to Cambridge Street, further restricting Park access. The master plan calls for building a new, smaller, high-efficiency at-grade parking garage at the Park Center.

![Diagram showing parking redistribution](image2.jpg)
PARK IMPROVEMENTS

233 ACRES OF PARK IMPROVEMENTS
20 MILES OF NEW & IMPROVED TRAILS
16 NEW & IMPROVED ACCESS POINTS
NEW ACCESSIBLE PLAYGARDENS
2 NEW DOG PARKS
NEW PARK WIDE BICYCLE NETWORK
21 ACRES OF NEW LANDSCAPE
35 ACRES OF NEW & IMPROVED HABITAT
2,000 NEW TREES
IMPROVED PARKING & MOBILITY
NEW & IMPROVED FOOD AND PICNIC AREAS
IMPROVED HYDROLOGIC SYSTEMS
2017 MASTER PLAN

4 PROJECT AREAS

MASTER PLAN LEGEND

1. Play Hills
2. Central Arrival Landscape
3. Miller Outdoor Theatre
4. Picnic Grove
5. Historic Clubhouse
6. Central Bayou Connection
7. Hermann Park Family Commons
8. Playground for All Children
9. McGovern Lake Lawn
10. Bayou Parkland West
11. South Bayou Portal
12. North Bayou Portal
13. Dog Park and Exercise Field
14. Nature Play Area
15. Nature Pavilion
16. Bayou Wetland Habitat
17. Grand Gateway
18. Caroline Street Arrival Landscape
19. Main Street Promenade
20. Hermann Drive Improvements
21. Dog Park

MASTER PLAN LEGEND

Park Center
Hermann Park Family Commons
Bayou Parkland
Park Perimeter

MASTER PLAN LEGEND

BW Bayou Parkland West
PC Park Center
CS Caroline Street Arrival Landscape
BC Central Bayou Connection and North Portal
GG Grand Gateway
HF Hermann Park Family Commons
MS Main Street Promenade
AT Allis Trail Improvements
EB Eastern Bayou Enhancements
WB Western Bayou Enhancements
HD Hermann Drive Improvements
MT Miller Outdoor Theatre

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
PARK CENTER

PC - PARK CENTER
The Park Center will be transformed from a series of large surface parking lots into a new play landscape built over and concealing a single-story, at-grade parking garage. The project also creates new arrival landscapes for the Park, the zoo, and Miller Outdoor Theatre.

PC - CENTRAL BAYOU CONNECTION
This project will enhance the existing pedestrian connection through the center of the golf course by providing pedestrian and bicycle trails between Brays Bayou and the Park Center. A pedestrian bridge over Hermann Park Drive will allow grade-separated access to the new play hills at the Park Center. The new North Bayou Portal, in combination with the existing South Bayou Portal, will create pedestrian and bicycle circulation loops between the bayou and the center of the Park.
HERMANN PARK FAMILY COMMONS

The recently completed Park corner at the intersection of Fannin and Cambridge Streets will be transformed into a welcoming civic area, drawing in visitors from the Texas Medical Center and Rice University. Food service and shaded benches will provide a graceful new entrance into the Park. From the corner, visitors will be guided down a series of curving pathways planted with flowering tree allees and sloped picnic lawns.

The drop-off on Fannin Street at the historic pavilion will be improved to provide access for families to a series of new party pavilions and the restored historic pavilion, which will be available to rent for parties and small events. The playground for all children will be updated with new water play and landscape features. An elevated, sloped lawn will create views across McGovern Lake to the Park Center’s new play hills. A lawn will provide a venue for events that are too small or informal for the Miller Outdoor Theatre.

“A GATHERING PLACE, TULSA, OK, MVVA

“Hermann Park should employ a huge nature-themed playground. Completely reconstructed and fenced-in playgrounds, surrounded by fresh and new picnic and restroom pavilions, would vastly improve the northern park zone.”
BAYOU PARKLAND

This project will improve connections between Brays Bayou and the center of Hermann Park, improve trails along both sides of the bayou, and improve the habitat value of the bayou.

**RB – BAYOU PARKLAND WEST**

A 600-car parking garage at MacGregor Way and Cambridge Street will accommodate relocated cars from the Park Center. The garage will be integrated into the landscape with a green roof terrace and screening landforms. Trails below MacGregor Way and over Cambridge Street will provide seamless and safe connections.

**WB – WESTERN BAYOU ENHANCEMENTS**

A braided network of pedestrian and bicycle trails will provide improved connections along the bayou through improved habitat. An exercise field and dog park with a small parking lot will increase activity between MacGregor Way and the bayou.

**EB – EASTERN BAYOU ENHANCEMENTS**

A similar braided trail system will connect a number of new landscape elements, including a new wetland habitat at Almeda Road and Holcombe Boulevard, a nature pavilion reuse the Park maintenance shed, and a nature play area in the existing oak grove.

“This portion (South Bayou Portal and Bayou Parkland West) is so picturesque and cute but there is no safe way to access it because of the high speed traffic cutting it off.”
This project will enhance pedestrian and bicycle crossings around the Park perimeter and improve traffic flow at the Grand Gateway, Caroline Street, and Cambridge Street.

MS - MAIN STREET PROMENADE
A new Main Street crossing will be added, the existing church parking lot between Fannin and Main Streets will be expanded, and new shade trees will be planted along Fannin Street.

HD - HERMANN DRIVE IMPROVEMENTS
Pedestrian and bicycle access across Hermann Drive will be enhanced and new street trees planted. A new dog park will be created at the corner of Hermann Drive and Almeda Road.

GG - GRAND GATEWAY
Traffic safety and flow patterns will be improved at the Park’s historic entrance while strengthening pedestrian connections to the Museum District and Macom Fountain.

CS - CAROLINE STREET ARRIVAL LANDSCAPE
A more welcoming entrance to the Park will be created with improved traffic flow, and pedestrian and bike safety.

“this stretch of the trail (along Cambridge between Fannin and Hermann Park Drive) is totally bottle necked and hazardous, and completely inaccessible to disabled and overgrown with bamboo from the zoo. Could be a much wider sidewalk with a feature or graphic walls with murals depicting the zoo or zoo views into the zoo.”
Over a century since George Hermann made his big announcement at City Auditorium, Hermann Park that bears his name has grown into Houston’s premier public space, one that attracts six million visitors a year from every zip code and walk of life. Successful as the Park is, much remains to be done to fulfill Hermann’s dream of a place for all Houstonians. The master plan created by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. lays out a bold vision for a greener, more accessible, and more cohesive Hermann Park, a Park that will serve the needs of all Houstonians well into the future.

It’s in our power to bring that vision to life. Please consider joining the thousands of Houstonians who have donated their time and money to support the Conservancy as it works to implement the new master plan. With your help, Hermann Park will continue to thrive for the next hundred years.