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Story: Steven Litt • Photo: Plural Studio • September 29, 2023

See the latest designs for Cleveland's Irishtown Bend Park, now headed for city review Oct. 6

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Starting in a few years, redbud trees could bloom every spring along the west bank of the Cuyahoga River at Irishtown Bend, adding clouds of pink and magenta to what promises to be one of the most impressive new urban parks in the Great Lakes.

Archaeological sites where 19th-century Irish immigrants lived along the riverbank, giving it the Irishtown name, could be framed by sheets of Corten steel to keep them visible and protected from sedimentation.

And a plaza near West 25th Street and the Detroit Superior Bridge could indicate where photographer Margaret Bourke White snapped her famous 1928 photo of the Terminal Tower rising above the Flats through clouds and smoke.

Those are some of the ideas percolating through newly updated plans for Irishtown Bend Park.

Planners will present the latest designs at a joint meeting of the city's planning and landmarks commissions on Friday, Oct. 6.

The designers and project sponsors are seeking final "conceptual" approval for a plan that includes bike paths, sport courts, playgrounds, meadows, staircases, a waterfront promenade, a healing garden, a grilling area, an amphitheater, and a pond that would all together fill 25 acres of vacant land sloping down to the river from West 25th Street in Ohio City.

Planners from the nonprofit LAND Studio and San Francisco-based Plural Studio, a landscape architecture firm, shared a preview with cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer.

Some $40 million worth of public amenities could be under construction in the park by 2025. Another $4 million to $5 million will be reserved for a long-term maintenance and programming fund, said Greg Peckham, executive director of the nonprofit LAND Studio. Roughly $17 million of the total needed has already been raised in public and philanthropic dollars.

Construction of the park will be timed to follow the completion of a two-year, $60 million project that the Port of Cleveland just started to stabilize the Irishtown slope, which has long threatened to slide into the river, blocking ore boats and other vessels serving industries upstream.

A turning point

The Port held a groundbreaking in late August after reaching agreement in March to buy a holdout property at the northwest corner of the park site from real estate developer and restaurateur Bobby George and his father, developer Tony George, who had litigated against the Port's effort to use eminent domain.

The .4-acre property includes a former Royal Castle hamburger restaurant topped by a large billboard facing northwest toward the intersection of Detroit Avenue and West 25th Street.

The settlement with the Georges lifted the final obstacle holding up the Port's demolition of the building and removal of 250,000 cubic yards of soil to prevent a landslide. The Port's contractor will also install a new green bulkhead along the river's edge, where none now exists, to stabilize the slope and provide habitat for aquatic life.

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The Port's work means that the dream of turning the long-empty, brush-covered Irishtown hillside into a beautiful regional park, an idea floated in 2007 in a locally organized international design competition, is all but ready to happen. The last hurdles include design approval and raising another $23 million to $28 million.

Plus, the Port, Cleveland Metroparks, the City of Cleveland, LAND Studio, and the West Creek Conservancy are in discussions over who will own and manage the future park.

"We certainly have a lot of heavy lifting to do, but I think that to some extent the progress that the Port is making builds a sense of urgency," Peckham said. "We have a goal; we have a deadline. We're feeling very optimistic that we're going to get to that goal."

Project history

Land assembly for the future park started in 2009 when ParkWorks, a predecessor of LAND Studio, bought a disused railroad right-of-way extending around Irishtown Bend with the idea of creating a spur trail heading north from the planned Towpath Trail to Lake Erie across the West Bank of the Flats.
LAND Studio and other entities including the West Creek Conservancy, the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) and Ohio City Inc. started collaborating in earnest on land assembly for the future park in 2016.

The Cleveland Foundation donated $5 million to start building Lake Link Trail in 2017. Finished sections of the trail, now managed by Metroparks, exist north and south of Irishtown Bend, the final gap.

Youngstown native Scott Cataffa, a principal and co-founder of Plural Studio, said in the interview that the future park will occupy a geographic nexus where Ohio City visitors and residents will be able to descend safely from West 25th Street down 100 feet of hillside on trails and staircases to a waterfront promenade.

The park will offer sweeping views of the downtown skyline, plus connections to the Cleveland Foundation Centennial Lake Link Trail, Edgewater Park, the Cleveland Metroparks Emerald Necklace, the Red Line Greenway and the regional Towpath Trail, extending 101 miles south to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, the City of Akron, and points south.

The "pond view" proposed for the future Irishtown Bend Park.

"It is an opportunity to really showcase the city to a hyperlocal but also a regional audience," Peckham said. "I can't think of anything that would come close to this kind of high-traffic place in the city that's going to have an excellent and very, very natural character."

Peckham and Cataffa described their intention to have the hillside planted as a climate-resilient landscape with native trees, grasses and shrubs. Holden Forests & Gardens will aid the project, along with Cleveland's Rid-All Green Partnership.

"Seeing freighters next to kayaks and seeing nature against the skyline of the city — those are the contrasts that are going to be really at the heart of what will make this place special," Peckham said.

Commuity partnerships

The park is being designed to dovetail with plans by the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority to turn West 25th Street, a major north-south spine on the city's West Side, into a bus rapid transit corridor.

Plans will also align with a reconfiguration of the Ohio City Farm, jointly administered by CMHA and nonprofit organization Refugee Response, and a relocation of Franklin Avenue, which cuts diagonally down and across the Irishtown hillside.

Residents in the housing authority's Riverview Towers apartments, which will overlook the park, have been engaged in developing plans, as have members of the Irish American Archives Society.

One thing that won't be added to the neighborhood is a large new parking area. Cataffa said that some new street parking may be added. Planners and property owners are also discussing how existing parking lots within walking distance could be used by visitors.

"People are just concerned about parking," Cataffa said. "That's typical."

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Design features

The park will have five principal entries uphill and downhill at its north and south ends, and on the uphill side off West 25th Street.

Amenities will be designed to universally accessible standards. Bike trails and pedestrian paths will be separated "so people zipping through on bikes are not disturbing more casual strollers," Cataffa said.

At the site of the Royal Castle building, which the Port will demolish, Plural Studio is suggesting a crystalline, one-story café with a plaza at the Detroit Avenue-West 25th Street corner with views of the skyline where photographer Margaret Bourke White once stood. Ohio City Inc. and LAND Studio are interviewing potential architects.

"The building should be a really beautiful gateway to the park, glassy and glowing like a lantern at night," Cataffa said. "You have a great opportunity for a jewel box building with great views."

Trails, terraced areas and slopes covered with flowering native grasses on the downhill side of the café and plaza would flow down to the river's edge.

Remnants of the Cleveland-Mahoning Railroad, including arched tunnels, could be adaptively reused as part of the park, Cataffa said, along with fragments of a one-time coal dock and the archaeological sites once occupied by Irishtown's immigrants.

Peckham said the objective is for park construction to begin seamlessly when the Port finishes its work in two years.

"We are in active fundraising mode for the project right now," he said. "We've got multiple significant requests in with local and regional foundations. We've been getting nothing but positive responses, particularly now that people see the Port Authority work going forward and the issues at the top of the hill resolved."

Sara Byrnes Maier, a principal planner at Metroparks who participated in the interview, said she's excited about "taking something that was a negative with the hillside and creating a beautiful park."

She was equally excited by the collaboration required to bring the Port, the City of Cleveland, LAND Studio, Metroparks, and other partners together to work on the same goal.

"The creativity of the whole group has been great," she said.

Top Left: A rendering of the northern trailhead in the latest plans proposed for Irishtown Bend Park. **Top Right:** A birds eye view of the proposed ampitheater for Irishtown Bend Park. **Bottom:** A rendering of the lawn with a beautiful view of downtown.

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