

Locating a New Downtown Park Staff Report and Recommendation

September 23, 2015

Introduction

On January 6, 2015, the Madison Common Council adopted a resolution (File ID # 36044) authorizing staff to begin negotiations with property owners for the acquisition of property for a new neighborhood park in the general vicinity of West Johnson and North Bassett Streets. City staff have had discussions with some of the property owners in the area, but have concluded that it will not be possible to acquire sufficient property to develop a neighborhood park in this underserved area, at least without paying significantly above fair market value for the land. Accordingly, it was determined that if the City wants to develop a neighborhood park in this underserved area, it will be necessary for the City to exercise its condemnation powers under Wis. Stat. Sec. 32.06.

Staff from multiple agencies have since evaluated a number of potential sites in the general vicinity of West Johnson and North Bassett Streets. This Report provides background on the planning context, site evaluation considerations and necessity of the acquisition. This Report also identifies the recommended site.

Planning Context

In 2012, the City adopted the *Downtown Plan*. This plan, developed over 4-years with extensive public input, describes the vision for the future of downtown and provides recommendations for realizing that future. It takes a comprehensive approach to the various elements of a healthy and vibrant downtown, including chapters such as: Ensure a Quality Urban Environment, Maintain Strong Neighborhoods and Districts, Enhance Livability, and Expand Recreational, Cultural, and Entertainment Offerings, among others.

Objective 8.1 of the *Downtown Plan* reads: “Create additional park land and enhance existing parks.” A key recommendation in achieving that objective is recommendation 204, which reads: “Develop a new park near the intersection of Bassett and West Johnson Streets to meet the needs of the underserved high-density housing at this location.”

As stated in the *Downtown Plan*, there is approximately 80 square feet of park land per downtown resident, compared to approximately 1,100 square feet per resident for the city as a whole. As densities increase, this shortage will only worsen unless new parks are established. The *Downtown Plan* includes a Park Coverage map (see Figure 1) that identified those portions of the downtown that are the most park deficient based on being more than a 1/4 –mile (about a 5 minute walk) from existing parks. Given the existing

and planned residential densities in this area, a target area for a new park was identified as being the most appropriate vicinity for establishing a new 1 ½ to 2 acre neighborhood park. Of note, since the *Downtown Plan* was adopted in 2012, there has been significant residential growth in the downtown area, particularly through the development of large apartment buildings. No new park land has been acquired to accommodate this massive residential growth, and areas for potential acquisition sites have been filled in by new development or will be redeveloped in the near future.



Figure 1: Park Coverage Map from the City of Madison *Downtown Plan* - Adopted 2012 (page 95)

Acquisition by Condemnation

Pursuant to the direction provided by the adopted *Downtown Plan* and aforementioned resolution authorizing staff to begin negotiations with property owners near the target area, staff from various agencies evaluated several potential park locations in the underserved area. Among the criteria considered were: location, size, shape, visibility, existing conditions, plan recommendations, sun exposure, and the potential to catalyze positive change among others. The Parks Division has indicated that it would need approximately 1 acre of open space to develop a neighborhood park to serve this area,

meaning that in most cases multiple properties would need to be assembled in order to develop a new park.

City staff have had discussions with some of the property owners in the area in an attempt to acquire sufficient adjacent properties to meet this need. However, staff inquiries were either ignored, rejected, or responded to with excessive demands. As a result, staff have determined that it would not be possible to acquire sufficient property in this area to meet the City's park needs through an arm's length transaction, at least without paying significantly above fair market value for the land.

Accordingly, it was determined that if the City wants to develop a neighborhood park in this underserved area, the City will have to exercise its condemnation powers under Wis. Stat. Secs. 32.06 and 62.22(1) in order to acquire the necessary property interests.

Recommendation

Based on the site evaluation, staff believes that, in order to best meet the needs identified in the *Downtown Plan* and develop a neighborhood park in the downtown that can effectively serve this rapidly developing and highly underserved area, that the City will have to condemn an approximately one-acre site at the northeast corner of W. Mifflin Street and N. Bassett Street (see Figure 2).

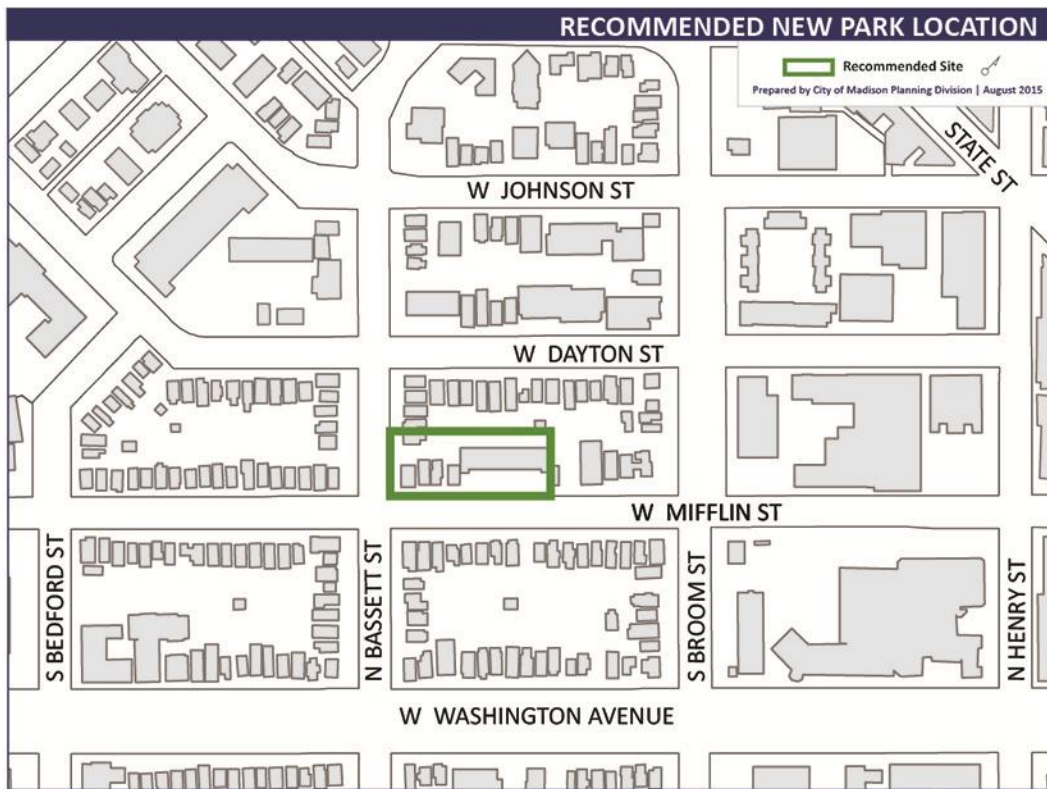


Figure 2: Recommended new park location

Staff recommends this site based primarily on the following reasons:

- 1) *Location:* The site consists of six parcels totaling slightly over one acre and is situated within the target area. It should be noted that the outline for the target area on the Park Coverage map is intended to identify the optimal vicinity for a new park. The location is in the park deficient portion of downtown and in the core of recent and planned high-density residential development that will accommodate thousands of new residents in close proximity. Many of these new developments will be within two blocks of this park and residents will be able to access it without having to cross major thoroughfares. This location is also recommended for somewhat less intense development than some of the other sites considered. The location on the northwest side of Mifflin Street provides for sun exposure throughout the day, and given the planned building heights in the area based upon the *Downtown Plan* and the height limitations in the Zoning Code, sun to the site will not be blocked by new development as a park on the southeast side of the street would experience.
- 2) *Recent Residential Development:* In the last 20 years, approximately 2,584 new units have been built and another 626 new units are under construction or in the approval process within a 1/4 –mile (about a 5 minute walk) of the recommended site (see Figure 3). Other parcels within this area are expected to redevelop at densities significantly higher than what exists today in the near future.

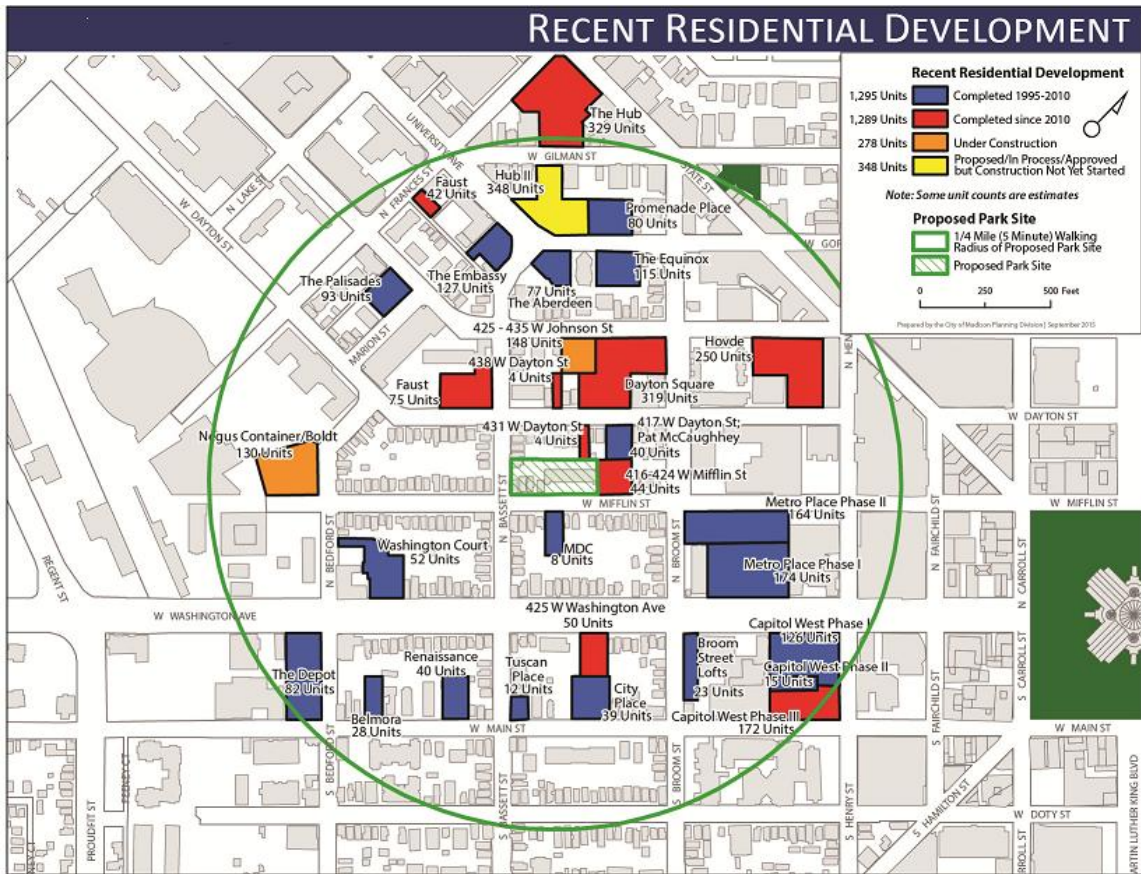


Figure 3: Recent residential development within 1/4 mile of recommended new park location.

- 3) *Size and Shape:* Parks Division staff determined that the primary park need in this area is lawn area with some opportunities for “light” programming such as volleyball. Staff studied the layout of such spaces and concluded that the size and geometry of the recommended site will accommodate these uses efficiently. The recommended site will allow the development of the park consistent with the Parks Division’s needs.
- 4) *Corner Lot:* The recommended site would front two streets, W. Mifflin Street and N. Bassett Street. This corner location is desirable for public safety purposes, planning purposes, and for better incorporating the park into the neighborhood. The corner lot location allows for views into and through the site from two streets. Corner lots also facilitate pedestrians walking through the park. These are important considerations in planning for parks where people feel safe.

Staff from the following agencies contributed to this Report: Parks Division, Planning Division, and Economic Development Division.