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The new Commons park. Photo by Sarah McKenzie

Boosters want to build buzz for the Commons

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The rise of East Town

Chicago has Millennium Park. New York City has Central Park. In Houston, it's Discovery Green, and in Detroit it's Campus Martius Park.

So what's Minneapolis' iconic urban green space, that place that's both a must-see tourist draw and a daily refuge for locals? Someday, maybe, it could be Downtown East Commons.

That's the ambitious vision of the new 4.2-acre park's biggest boosters, including City Council Member Jacob Frey. The park is taking shape amid the ongoing, \$400-million redevelopment of a five-block area around U.S. Bank Stadium that is transforming part of Frey's Ward 3.

"Every world-class city has a vibrant downtown, central park," said Frey, who imagined the Commons as both a "kitchen table" for Minneapolitans and the first place they'll bring their out-of-town guests. "It should be emblematic of everything great about Minneapolis."

The city spent nearly \$20 million to acquire and prepare two blocks for the Commons, one a former surface parking lot and the other the longtime home to the Star Tribune's headquarters, until it was demolished last year. The plan is to recoup the costs through parking fees paid at a new stadium-adjacent ramp.

The park is nearly surrounded by new construction, including Edition, a "boutique" apartment on the park's western edge; Wells Fargo's twin 17-story office towers to the north; and the new, \$1.1-billion home of the Minnesota Vikings football club to the east.

The eastern parcel that makes up the largest part of the Commons was expected to open in time for the stadium's July 22 ribbon cutting ceremony. The fencing and jersey barriers surrounding the park's western section should come down in mid-August, predicted Tony Barranco, vice president of Ryan Cos., the developer behind the massive Downtown East project.

Construction costs for this first phase total \$10.8 million, according to city estimates.

What Ryan Cos. is delivering is much more than the flat patch of grass the city and company agreed on when they negotiated the Downtown East redevelopment plan in

2013. But it's also less than the full vision for the park developed by Hargreaves Associates, the award-winning San Francisco-based landscape architecture firm that won a city contract for the project in 2015.

In January, when it learned a campaign to raise \$22 million for the Commons was progressing more slowly than expected, the City Council decided to accelerate construction but scale-back the overall plan for the park. Two park buildings, terraces around the park's Great Lawn and a "water plaza" stripped from the plan may appear later — or they could be replaced by new elements, like a restaurant, Frey suggested.

Downtown Council President and CEO Steve Cramer, another key player in the Commons, suggested a wait-and-see approach.

"It could be that in the end, doing it this way is what makes the most sense, because we'll get a sense of usage patterns and what is the next round of investments going to be in that park," Cramer said. "Maybe it's going to be what Hargreaves designed, maybe it's not, based on the usage."

A new kind of Minneapolis park

In a city that values and is known for its parks, the Commons will be something different — a kind of public-private collaboration common in other parts of the country but new to Minnesota.

The Minneapolis Downtown Council established Green Minneapolis, a nonprofit conservancy, to run the Commons and, eventually, other public spaces downtown. The fledgling organization is currently running the fundraising campaign, but it won't be ready to take on the park for at least six months, so the city awarded the Downtown Improvement District (part of the Downtown Council) a \$600,000 contract to manage park operations in the meantime.

Cramer said the city would still have a role in funding park operations. The cost is expected to run to \$1.9 million in 2017, although a significant part of the conservancy's role will be to attract revenue-generating sponsorships and park programming to offset some of that expense, Cramer said, adding that there may be a need for ongoing fundraising, as well.

The size of the city's ongoing financial commitment to the Commons is one of several questions that have dogged the park for months.

Some who followed the design process were disappointed when the city and Hennepin County couldn't agree to close Portland Avenue, a one-way county road that divides the park in two. The road has been narrowed from three auto lanes to two, but traffic will continue to flow through the park.

"There are grade-A parks around the world that do have streets running through them," Frey said. "We are not an anomaly by any extent."

The very nature of the Commons as a public space was also put into question by agreements with the Vikings and the Minnesota Sports Facilities Authority that grant both entities the right to use all or part of the park for a combined 58 days each year.

Frey said the public would have access to the park "even on Vikings game days." Cramer wouldn't rule out the possibility of the park closing for private use — by the Vikings, MSFA or even Green Minneapolis — but said "if such events occur they will be very rare."

The Commons isn't a typical neighborhood park, and Green Minneapolis Executive Director Win Rockwell said developing an identity for the space would be a process of "co-creation" with the public.

"It takes work," Rockwell said. "The (conservancy-run) parks that have succeeded in other cities around the country typically have gotten there by a thoughtful, incremental process of focusing on the space, finding activities that really work in that space outdoors, that fit in that community."

Rockwell, currently Green Minneapolis' sole employee, said he aims to add 10 to 12 full-time staff members by the time the organization takes over the park, probably in the spring. Their mission isn't just to be caretakers of the grass, trees and hardscape seating areas but to program activities and events that draw in the public.

"The goal of a destination park is to be humming, to have a buzz to it," he said.

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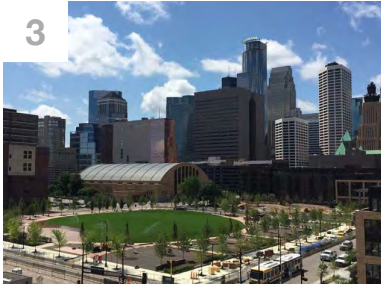


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