

The Next Phase for Emancipation Park

By Naveen Inampudi

Current proposals to renovate Emancipation Park will focus on both restoration and expansion, from refurbishing the existing community center and pool to creating new water features and trails to enhance the experience of park guests. Reflecting the desires expressed by the community, the overall development project, estimated at \$33.6 million, has three central objectives: to create a beautiful and functional park space for the residents of Third Ward, to spark redevelopment of the neighborhood, and to make the park a destination point for national and international visitors.¹ Given Emancipation Park's historical significance, Michael Mauer of M2L Associates, the local landscape architect for the Emancipation Park upgrade, stressed that the Freelon Group, which is handling the improvements, recognizes that adding to the park while maintaining some of the park's original form and amenities are paramount to reviving the park and honoring its legacy.²

Over time, the park has evolved to meet many different needs, and the Freelon Group has proposed a number of additions to reestablish the park as a cornerstone of Third Ward. A redesigned recreation center with multipurpose functionality will be the focal point of the park to draw in the neighborhood children and create an atmosphere that engenders daily use of the facilities by young and old alike. The recreation center will boast a bevy of features including a high-school-size gym, fitness center, locker rooms, and classroom space. Mauer notes that the design of the recreation center encourages its use as a meeting point. Other additions to the park include a patio in the northwest corner with rocking chairs where adults can sit and watch their children on the playground and an expanded picnic area in the southwest corner to add to the neighborhood

feel. Throughout the park, plaques will be added that commemorate Emancipation Park's history, telling the story of its founders and heritage.³

The Freelon Group and M2L Associates aim to create a sustainable park that keeps maintenance costs and energy usage to a minimum, including the addition of solar power components. The architects have designed the community center to maximize efficiency by taking advantage of natural lighting during the day and using the lights only when necessary at night. They hope to take advantage of nature by reusing rainwater collected in retention ponds and tanks to water the plants and grass, keeping water bills to a minimum.⁴

The design team, managed by ESPA Corp, plans to improve the park's functionality so that residents can use the open areas and new buildings for community events and future Juneteenth celebrations. The designers hope to continue the spirit of by-gone traditions like cotton candy and Johnny Nash concerts while appealing to a whole new generation of park patrons. They want Emancipation Park to remain a center for mobilization and activism, with rallies such as the one held there recently to demonstrate support for Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager who was walking home from a convenience store when a neighborhood watch captain in Sanford, Florida, confronted and killed him following a struggle.⁵

Reverend Jack Yates and his congregation started off with a ten-acre lot in 1872, and since then, Emancipation Park has remained important to area residents, even when it showed its years. After the renovation project is completed, historic Emancipation Park will once again be a jewel of Third Ward.

Emancipation Park bird's-eye-view artist rendering.

Image courtesy of OST/Alameda Corridors Redevelopment Authority.

