

Bailey Brook Park & Recreation Area, Gardner – FY2020 PARC Grant Application

Project Narrative

Project Overview

The City of Gardner recently acquired the 37-acre Bailey Brook Park & Open Space Recreation Area through a FY 2018 PARC grant and an adjacent 84-acre Conservation Area, Bailey Brook Conservation Area, funded by the LAND grant program (Acquisition Phase – Completed June 2018).

The City is now submitting an FY 2020 PARC grant to design and develop an open space, multipurpose park and conduct site work associated with site access driveways, parking, construction of an ADA accessible trail, and 1-mile, healthy-heart, wellness walking loop trail with a scenic overlook and sitting & resting area, at the Bailey Brook Park located off of Leo Drive. Both trails will include interpretive nature learning signage and other experiential, nature-based learning components. The accessible, ADA compliant trail will also include tactile, sensory, playground equipment elements for nature-based play and learning for children with social-emotional learning and development disabilities.

The initial design and development project proposed here (Development Phase I) will allow the City of Gardner to create an engineered, landscape and construction design plan for a low-impact design, multi-use, open space park and playground and will include the necessary site work to provide access to the park (e.g., grading and gravel base material surface of an access driveway and parking area), design and facilitate the initial and future development, and create basic amenities like a 1-mile walking path, improved access to Bailey Brook, an accessible loop trail, and nature-based learning and exploration features (e.g., plant and tree id placards, natural timber and stone play features, and interactive, tactile, nature-based learning features). The design will incorporate input from City officials and the public, including members of Gardner's Environmental Justice population and will include focus on the construction of athletic fields, a playground and nature exploration & learning area, and restrooms (See Map: Conceptual Plan). The design will also include low-impact-design, natural stormwater improvements in the form of infiltration trenches, bioswales, and raingardens. In addition to the design and site work that this initial phase will provide, the current proposal (Development Phase I) will also allow for immediate passive accessory uses such as mountain biking, walking, hiking, fishing, snowshoeing and cross-country skiing and will also facilitate a proposed free, public disc golf course to be constructed by a group of committed group of volunteers with donations and funding from a regional disc golf association and local partners.

A secondary development phase (Development Phase II) will be included in the design plan and future funding will be sought from private, state, local, and Federal sources. The full design will incorporate plans for the development of a playground, athletic fields, LID drainage (e.g., swales, infiltration trenches, raingardens), accessible bathrooms, and related utilities and services.

The proposed park elements will occupy the upland area of the property, on the east side of Bailey Brook, outside of critical habitat and protected resource areas. The Park will be developed on an area of the property, within which a timber harvest was recently completed (**See Map: Conceptual Plan, shaded area**). Since the land has been recently harvested and the proposed Park area has been cleared to the greatest extent, minimal tree removal will be required and will be avoided wherever possible to maintain a forested open space park. However, a considerable amount of grading, stumping and grubbing will be necessary within the previously cut area given the undeveloped history of the property and recent logging activity and associated slash and stump debris. The recent timber harvest left a buffer of forested land adjacent to existing homes on Leo Drive, which we plan to maintain and which could be augmented by the planting of additional trees and shrubbery in targeted locations to be identified in the design plan. Similarly, forested areas within the park, but outside of the proposed development area, will be left to remain as forested and will serve as an Open Space area to include a 1-mile loop trail, scenic vistas of Bailey Brook, and a natural buffer between the park and the adjacent Conservation Area and Bailey Brook. The Park will be accessed from three locations with road frontages to Leo Drive. A singular, central, main entrance is proposed on Leo Drive

across from Margaux Way for vehicle access and two additional gated pedestrian and emergency entrances are proposed near the Northern and Southern portions of the park at existing access points with frontage to Leo Drive.

Park Location

The area adjacent to the proposed park has seen significant development and increased population over the last few decades, associated with a large, multi-phased residential subdivision adjacent to Wilder Brook and its' Wetland Resource Areas. As a result a large park in West Gardner was identified as a priority need in the City's most recent Open Space and Recreation Plan. This proposed project, Bailey Brook Park, is located within a half-mile radius of 303 residences, 236 of which are considered to be within safe walking distance (**See Map: Population Served**), and would allow the City to achieve the goal of a multipurpose park in West Gardner as identified in our Open Space and Recreation Plan. To further demonstrate the suitability and community need of this proposed park we have provided an additional map displaying the site location and the distance to the nearest park and Environmental Justice Area (**See USGS Map: Proximity Map and FHWA Title VI Map**).

Community Needs, OSRP Goals, and Project Benefits

The City of Gardner is a diverse, low-income, community that acts as a regional hub and includes a developed downtown commercial and residential district in addition to many developed and densely populated neighborhoods. The majority of the City's area includes designated Title VI Populations including, Elderly, Foreign Born, and Language designated populations. Bailey Brook Park is located directly within a Title VI Designated Elderly Population Area and will serve this population and all other Title VI designated populations throughout the community and within close proximity to this proposed multipurpose park.

Development of a park at this location is consistent with the goals and needs analysis of our Open Space and Recreation Plan, specifically: Goal One, Objectives 2, 3, and 5; Goal Two, Objectives 3, 4, and 5; Goal Three, Objective 4; and Goal Five, Objectives 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Further, the 7-Year Action Plan of our OSRP identified the specific goals of "Identifying and Acquiring Land in West Gardner Suitable for a Municipal Park and Playground" (OSRP, Sec. 8-8, p. 50), and "development of a Multi-purpose Municipal Park with Playground Equipment and Athletic Fields in West Gardner" (OSRP, Sec. 8-8, p. 51). Accomplishment of the acquisition portion of this goal was targeted for the first two years of our OSRP and was achieved within that time-frame with the identification and acquisition of the Omealia and RHO land under an FY-18 PARC grant. Achieving the second portion of this goal, *development of a multi-purpose park in West Gardner*, was targeted for years 3-5 and is the subject of this application. The project is also consistent with several of the needs identified in the Statewide Conservation and Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) and current draft plan, including serving underserved populations (e.g., Title VI, Elderly Population and EJ Area), increasing the availability of water-based recreation (e.g., access to Bailey Brook for canoeing, kayaking, and fishing), connecting and enhancing accessibility of trails (e.g., 1-mile park loop trail, and connections and access to existing trails on adjacent conservation land), and creating and improving access to parks and recreational opportunities close to home and within neighborhoods (e.g., creation of a multipurpose park within one of the largest residential neighborhoods in town where no such park or safe access to any nearby parks exists). In addition, the proposed Bailey Brook Park addresses all of the needs and values identified by the designated categories of the PARC grant program rating system as listed and described below:

Disadvantaged Populations and Accessible Amenities

The project is located within close proximity to an Environmental Justice (EJ) area and directly within a Designated Title VI Elderly Population Area (**See Maps: USGS Proximity Map and FHWA Title VI Map**). The park will serve the elderly population of the area and community and, as a public multipurpose park, will also serve the broader community, including EJ Areas and their populations. While the project is not located directly within an EJ Area, it *is* located within a Title VI Designated Population (Elderly) area and will directly serve the public of the community, including EJ Areas and other Title VI Designated Population Areas (**See Map: FHWA Title VI Map**), by providing future active recreation amenities (public athletic fields) and access to nature and a unique type of park, one that

provides typical urban/suburban park amenities found in most neighborhood parks, *and* the natural areas of undeveloped, forested open space often lacking in EJ and Title VI Communities. The opportunity for people to experience nature, where such an opportunity may not otherwise exist, is critically important and beneficial to the experiential learning and development of urban and suburban children and families, especially those from designated EJ and Title VI areas.

The Project will also increase access and accessibility to recreational amenities for all users of all abilities. A proposed universally accessible path will be both universally accessible and include interactive, tactile, sensory nature learning and exploration features geared toward children and adults with individual and unique pathways to learning, auditory and sensory abilities, alternative learning styles, and individual processing and emotional response behaviors. The Park will be open year-round, offering recreational opportunities during all seasons such as walking, hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, mountain biking and nature exploration and learning. It will also provide a location for the development of much needed athletic fields for the popular and growing sports of soccer, and lacrosse. Further, a plan has been submitted to the Gardner Development Review Committee for a Disc Golf Course that would be designed, built and maintained by dedicated group of volunteers. Since the acquisition of the property under a 2018 Park Grant, Bailey Brook Park has been identified by that group as the most suitable and likely place for a free, public disc golf course in Gardner.

Another compelling justification for the need, suitability and benefit of this site as a public park and recreation area is that it would provide a gateway for access to existing conservation lands including the recently acquired Bailey Brook Conservation Area and Alisaukas Conservation Area. Providing this connection between people and nature is an important goal of the proposed multipurpose Open Space Park. To help meet this goal, a trail, natural play area, and interpretive nature signs along the trail will be included in the design of this park. Care will be taken to maintain and promote the natural conditions of the site and implement them into the future design and purpose of the park.

Climate Resilience and Environmental Education & Stewardship (Benefits of a Forested Open Space Park)

Nature based recreation has been documented to improve health, academic performance, and overall wellness among people of all ages, abilities, social and economic status (See attached supporting infographics: Children & Nature Network; Park Rx). This proposed park will enhance climate resiliency and protect and enhance water-based recreation by providing a buffer zone between the residential development and Bailey Brook, a state-designated Cold-water Fisheries Resource, and its adjacent wetland and flood-plain. Providing protection of designated flood zones and wildlife habitat and corridors will play a crucial role in climate resiliency under current and future conditions. The Project will enhance and promote environmental stewardship through interpretive signage and connections with nature. These goals will be addressed in our upcoming MVP Planning efforts and will certainly play a central role in proposed actions toward pursuing climate change resiliency here in Gardner.

Public Support and Commitment to Park Maintenance

Public support for this project has been expressed by several local and abutting residents and the matter has been presented to the Conservation Commission, Finance Committee and City Council and discussed in open Public Meetings. Two community petitions were circulated and signed by a number of abutting residents and members of the nearby Gardner Fish & Gun Club in support of the acquisition of the Omealia property for Open Space. The Gardner News has also run multiple stories detailing the proposals for the acquisition of land and development of a combined Open Space and Recreation Park (See attached supporting info: The Gardner News). We have not received any negative comments or opposition from the public or their representatives in City Council. In 2018 the Gardner City Council voted favorably to support an earlier version of this grant application and the proposed City cost budget associated with the development of a multipurpose park under the PARC grant program. A copy of this vote is included as an attachment to this grant and will be re-submitted to the City Council for their re-authorization this Fiscal Year.

This proposed park will continue to develop and benefit from cooperative partnerships between the City and recreational user groups and organizations and non-profit Land Trusts (e.g., Mount Grace Land Trust and North County Land Trust). The Conservation Commission and Department of Public Works will build upon and enhance existing land stewardship activities and partnerships. Successful examples of these partnerships can be found in other examples of joint land stewardship activities between the Conservation Commission, Department of Public Works, Engineering and Forestry Department, the Cultural Council, Youth Commission, youth sports groups, and local land trust. For example, the Conservation Commission and Department of Public Works have worked closely with the Millers River Watershed Council, Mount Grace Land Trust, and North County Land Trust on trail-related projects such as the Millers River Blue Trail and hiking bridges and signage for along City trails. In the past few years alone Gardner Boyscout Troop 9 has conducted several public service projects within Gardner's Open Space lands and public parks. With specific regard to this proposed project, the Chair City Soccer Club has expressed their support and willingness to provide stewardship, host athletic events, and maintain and upkeep the park's proposed athletic fields in the future.

Community Compact and MVP Program

The City of Gardner was an early adopter of the Community Compact Agreement and was the second community in the Commonwealth to sign a compact with the Governor's Office. While our Community Compact commitment is focused on public safety and transportation improvements, we have dedicated substantial resources and focus, and made substantial investments and recent improvements, in Conservation, Open Space, Recreation, Trails, Forest Stewardship, Recreational Trail Improvements, Parks and Playgrounds, Sustainability, Flood Control, and Climate Change Resiliency. For example, recent efforts under the Mass DOT Complete Streets Program to develop a Complete Streets Prioritization Plan have focused on connectivity of trails (including the North Central Pathway Bike trail) between Conservation, Recreation, and Public Service Areas. Such connections serve to enhance public safety, health & well-being, and a connection to the natural environment through open space recreation.

In 2019, the City of Gardner successfully applied for and was awarded grant funding through the Massachusetts Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Program to identify and assess our community vulnerabilities (and strengths) related to climate change and to develop a Climate Change Resiliency Plan. We look forward to developing our MVP Plan and continuing our efforts to identify, address, and reduce potential vulnerabilities and increase our preparedness and resiliency to future change. A component of our MVP Planning will assess urban tree canopy in City Parks and will include considerations on how the Bailey Brook Park can incorporate LID and achieve sustainability and resiliency targets and goals. The proposed Bailey Brook Open Space Park is directly in line with those goals and will be a large part of our future community efforts toward addressing climate change and promoting sustainable and wise use of our land and resources by our citizens of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. The park has the potential to serve as a model of both cultural and natural diversity that can exist in a forested, open space, multipurpose, community and regional park.