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A Park First
Approach and
Tenets of
Design

When working on a beloved public open space, there is never a shortage of needs to be met. Prescott Park is no different. The volume of input that was collected throughout the master plan process is a testament to the many residents, groups, and event visitors and individuals with heart-felt interest in the park. Despite the incredibly varied and diverse interests at play, the goal of making Prescott Park the best it can be was shared by all.

First and foremost, Prescott Park is a waterfront open space for the people of Portsmouth. It is, in fact, one of the few places you can get close to the water and even touch it next to the South Pier. The city recognizes the value in making meaningful connections to the water that has informed so much of Portsmouth's sense of place.



Prescott Park is also an important venue for all arts. Currently, the PPAF is the primary permittee for arts-related programming within the park. The rise in popularity of these offerings brings increased park use, which inherently puts more pressure on the physical infrastructure. This development, coupled with deferred capital investment, creates a noticeable tension between programming and the sustainability of a well-maintained park.

Public waterfront access is also an immense opportunity to increase resiliency to the impacts of climate change for coastal cities. Portsmouth recently released a study on climate change and the impacts to the city. This report can be found at <http://www.planportsmouth.com/cri/CRI-Report.pdf>.



At just over 10 acres, this park cannot be all things to all people. The list of hopes, wants, and needs outweighs the carrying capacity of the park in its current condition and configuration. By developing the Park First approach, a framework for decision making was developed, which informed design strategy.

A park is a collection of public resources. Those resources are things like access to the water, green open space for passive recreation, public forum space for freedom of expression, and respite from the density of a busy downtown. A Park First approach puts these resources at the forefront of spatial planning and formal design.

The tenets of design were developed over several months of project engagement. They are born out of the discourse that was generated by the findings, assessment, public engagement, community meetings, analysis and design proposals presented for Prescott Park.

Recognize City ownership of the park and its structures

Prescott Park was assembled, built and improved with park amenities over many decades. The reality that the park's parcels were assembled and improved over-time adds depth to the story of the park. The park's programming has evolved overtime as well through the introduction of arts and culture programming and organizations who have run them. At times, these developments have blurred the lines to some about who owns the Park and some of its structures. Through the Master Plan process the city-owned nature of the land and structures has been clarified and emphasized as has the need to ensure future improvements are city-directed and controlled.

Use “for park and recreational purposes” per the Josie F. Prescott Trust

Per the Trust, the land is to be used “for park and recreation purposes.” When the Trust was established, possible purposes were likely fairly limited given the ideology about parks and recreation at the time. As the park and community have evolved, definitions of recreation have expanded and now generally include passive and active outdoor pursuits as well as activities typically occurring indoors.

Ensure pedestrian through-route accessibility at all times

Events within the park draw a significant crowd at times. These larger gatherings have been known to spill beyond designated lawn areas and extend to the edges of the park. Throughout the community process it was noted that this occurrence impedes pedestrian circulation within the park. Many comments provided to the city on how best to improve Prescott Park included the request to design a plan that facilitates an unencumbered path of

movement from one end of the park to the other, no matter the event happening at the time.

Maximize waterfront connection

Prescott Park is the largest contiguous section of waterfront with public access in the city and can be leveraged in the new master plan. With proximity to downtown, this park has the unique benefit of frontage along the Piscataqua River.

Integrate coastal resilience/adaptation strategies

The waterfront location makes the park a prime candidate to serve as the front line of defense for other low lying areas inland, including Strawberry Banke and much of the South End neighborhood. As our climate continues to change and sea levels rise, there is greater risk of storm surges, tidal inundation, and longer term flooding in these areas. Coordinated planning and resilient design can create much-needed defense within Prescott Park.

Maintain and enhance maritime historical connection

Strong connections to the maritime history can be expressed throughout the park. From interpretive features around historic architecture to the current Gundalow operations, there is no shortage of opportunity for Portsmouth to celebrate her maritime past in a very meaningful way.

Improve integration into the neighborhood

Prescott Park and the South End neighborhood have both evolved and adapted to meet contemporary societal needs. However they have done so largely independently. One goal of this master plan is to integrate the park and the surrounding neighborhood more effectively, both physically and programmatically.

Ensure presence for theater, dance, music and visual arts

It has been clear from the very beginning of this master plan process that Prescott Park's identity and heritage have been influenced by the integration of the arts, to the great benefit of all. Despite struggles to balance performing arts programming with neighborhood quality

of life and park capacity, there is an overarching belief that arts belong in this park. In order to do this effectively, a stage facility is required.

Maintain a Public Forum area

The Public Forum in Prescott Park is an outdoor plaza space designated for use by the public in their expression of freedom of speech and assembly. This space must be flexible and function as quality public park space even when not in use as a Public Forum.

Include meaningful invitations for youth to play

There are currently no formal opportunities for youth to play within the park. The small beach areas near the Sheafe and The Whale sculpture have become the de facto play spaces. Many people commented that well-integrated play elements would be welcome to provide multi-generational interest within the park. It was made clear that the interest was not in a traditional post and platform play structure made of primary colored plastic panels. Instead, play can be combined with public art or site furnishings in a way that fits within Prescott Park.

Preserve active maritime recreation, including public docking structures

The Gundalow Company is a vibrant presence in Prescott Park. Its operations contribute greatly to the aesthetic and cultural importance of the maritime recreation. The public docks are also incredibly popular and provide the only public accommodation for private boats to dock within the area.

Maintain/increase large open spaces for formal and informal activities

There are hundreds of informal activities that take place daily across the park and Four Tree Island. They are best supported by large open lawn areas that are flexible and accessible to all. Ideal lawn areas are mostly flat and uninterrupted by trees and structures. Time and again residents highlighted the value of the park for informal uses that are welcomed by such open spaces.

Ensure that parking does not take up precious waterfront park space

In general, there was acceptance of the approach to avoid surface parking within the park. Exceptions will be for handicap accessible parking and park vehicles, as well as access for deliveries and maintenance. A loading zone space will be included at the corner of State Street to allow people to drop people and belongings off at the park for events or to stock boats using the slips. Using nearby assets and partners like Strawberry Banke also seems to hold promise for the future.

Protect and preserve historic resources

There are tremendous historic assets within Prescott Park. The three buildings are rare architectural relics that show early maritime construction for both wood and brick structures. Monuments, sculptures and fountains can be found through out the park. Each element is uniquely embedded in the park and contributes to its sense of place.

