

EXCELSIOR COMMONS PARK

Guiding A Historic Green Space Into The 21st Century

LOCATION /

Excelsior, Minnesota

CATEGORY /

General Design

ABSTRACT /

The landscape architect guided the transformation of Excelsior Commons Park, preserving its historical legacy while embracing modern sustainability. The park's master plan, rooted in extensive community engagement, guided priority projects including a multi-use pavilion, concessions plaza, and ecological restoration area. By integrating innovative design principles, such as transparent structures and native plantings, the park now offers enhanced visitor experiences and equitable access to amenities. Through collaborative partnerships with the city and nonprofit conservancy, the landscape architects demonstrated their pivotal role in revitalizing cherished public spaces, ensuring Excelsior Commons Park remains a beloved destination for generations.

NARRATIVE /

Excelsior Commons Park is an iconic and historic public open space on the southern shore of Lake Minnetonka. The park is one of the first public commons established in 1854 and is both a cherished community asset and a destination within the greater region. The park's heavy public use, consistent programming, and aging facilities had begun to impact the visitor experience. The landscape architects led the establishment of design principles that guided architects to create transparent structures which emphasize the park's landscape and maintain culturally important vistas. The first series of design projects implemented have demonstrated stewardship of cultural resources and ecology, helping to guide a beloved historic park into the 21st century to be enjoyed by the next generation.

The park master planning process began in 2017 and included extensive on-site community engagement, site analysis, and conversation with city staff to understand the opportunities and challenges of the site. This information was synthesized in a list of guiding principles which established future programming needs, priority capital projects and policies for sustainable landscape practices and maintenance within the cultural landscape.

Building from the master plan, the landscape architect was engaged by the City of Excelsior to move priority projects into design and construction. The first project was to replace the 1970's era bandshell, an essential piece of the park's programming infrastructure. The landscape architect collaborated with a multi-disciplinary team to create an open, two sided, multifunctional pavilion. Rainwater is collected from the roof and used in adjacent

pollinator gardens, while custom weathering steel and wood seating is integrated into the hillside in a way that is elegant and unobtrusive. Surrounding mature oak trees were carefully protected during construction and measures put in place to reduce future root zone compaction. The Pavilion maintains its critical function as a stage for concerts and performances, and its open-air design and surrounding landscape features have made the space more usable for day-to-day park goers. Today, the pavilion is the home to morning yoga classes, is a rentable event space, and functions as an iconic focal point throughout the park and lake beyond.

The second priority project was the reconstruction of the concessions building and the creation of a supporting plaza. Located adjacent to the Pavilion, the project was designed to support the park's many events and includes bathrooms, covered seating, and fire features. The plaza transformed an asphalt maintenance drive into an accessible connection to the Pavilion area, creating more equitable access to the park's amenities. The landscape architects focused on improving the park's ecology with native plantings, a green roof, and woodland hillside garden that serves the dual purpose of protecting existing mature trees.

The third priority project looked to address issues around ecological health in an area of the park known as the Oak Knoll. The Oak Knoll is a high point located between two beaches, two playgrounds, and a bathhouse building. At the confluence of these heavily utilized amenities, pedestrians had carved desire lines throughout the sensitive landscape causing significant erosion. As a result, the trees had begun to

show signs of decline. The landscape architects developed a management plan and addressed tree protection, circulation, and planting design. Currently under construction, the project protects the important oak trees from further damage, connects key destinations without root zone compaction and establishes a renovated and ecologically sound planting area that is both preservation minded and future forward. This project expands the tree preservation approach seen in earlier projects, and sets a standard for reducing turf grass and increasing areas for native planting, stormwater infiltration, and wildlife habitat in the park.

The landscape architect has served as a trusted partner to the park's nonprofit conservancy and the City of Excelsior. In tandem with our planning and design efforts the landscape architect has consulted on various on-going efforts, including fundraising programs, public open space guidelines, and the siting and design of an overlook to commemorate an outstanding citizen.

ROLE AND AWARD WORTHINESS/

The projects at Excelsior Commons Park reflect the important role that landscape architects can play in the transformation of historic spaces and the value that our profession has in guiding architectural work to reflect a sensitivity to cultural resources. While the projects enhance and protect these character-defining resources, they simultaneously introduce more modern and ecologically focused approaches to park design. Lastly, this work demonstrates how Landscape Architects can serve as trusted advisors to a community spanning numerous projects and scales, resulting in a park landscape that will continue to be loved for generations to come.



“ The landscape architect not only provided tremendous vision and design, but also brought leadership and thoughtful partnership to the table, without which the project might not have succeeded. ”

- Eric Synder

*Community for the Commons Board
Member, Commons Renovation
Advisory Committee*

MASTER PLAN /

*COMPLETED OR IN PROGRESS PROJECT

*FUTURE PROJECT AREA



LAKE MINNETONKA

LAKESIDE SEATING

PAVILION

EAST KNOLL

OVERLOOK

BALLFIELD

EVENT LAWN

BOARDWALK

CONCESSIONS PLAZA

WEST KNOLL

OAK KNOLL RESTORATION

INFILTRATION

INFILTRATION

BEACH

COURT AREA IMPROVEMENTS

PORT AREA IMPROVEMENTS

PLAY BEACH

SOUTH BEACH + PLAY IMPROVEMENTS

OAK KNOLL STREET

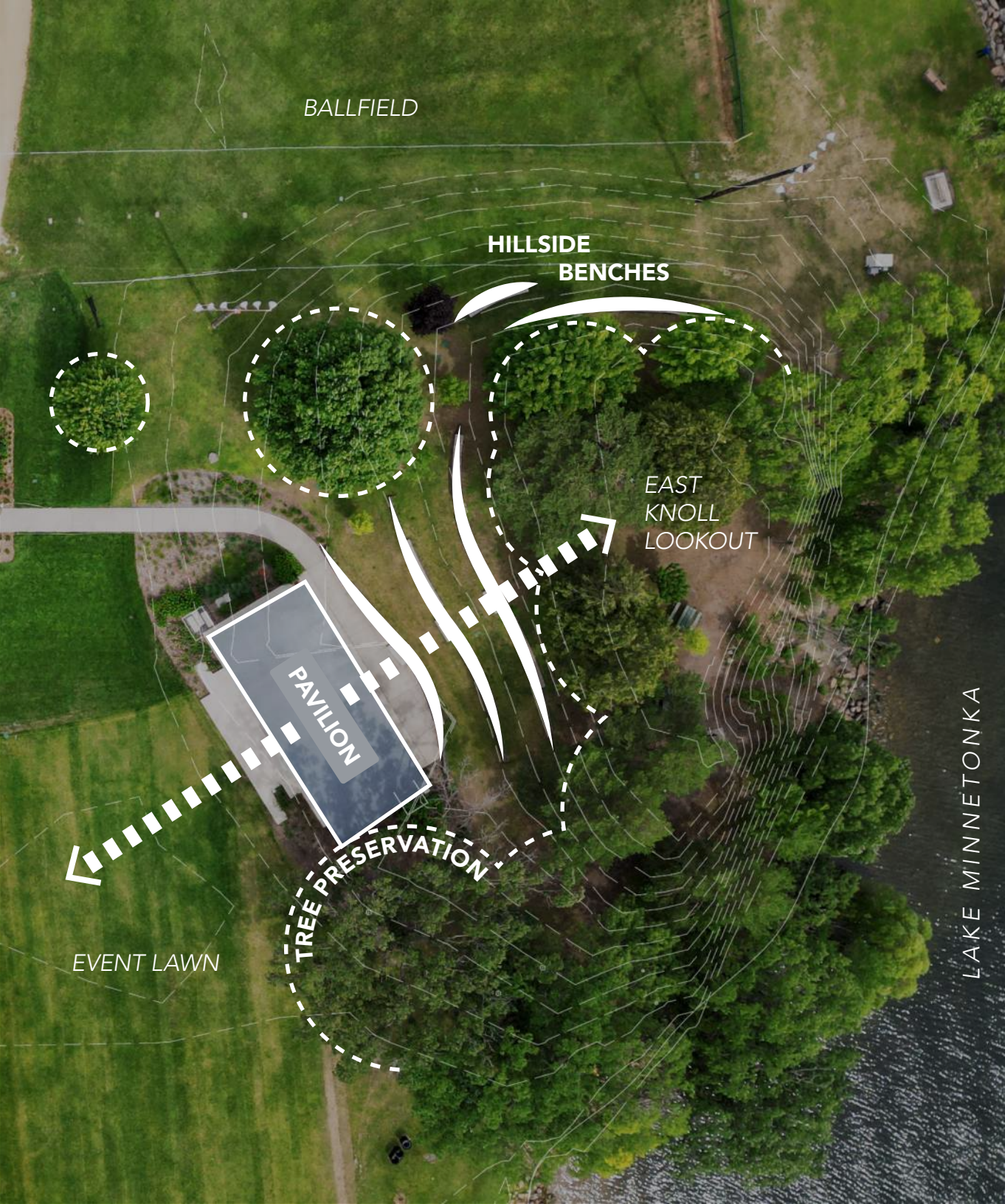
CEAR STREET

V LANE STREET

WEST STREET

LAKE STREET

LAKE STREET



RECONNECTING WITH LANDFORM / PAVILION

The design of the Pavilion landscape reconnects the performance space and event lawn with the historic East Knoll and Lake Minnetonka beyond. The hillside benches were carefully woven into the Knoll, and avoid the root zones of existing heritage trees, which date to the early 1900's.

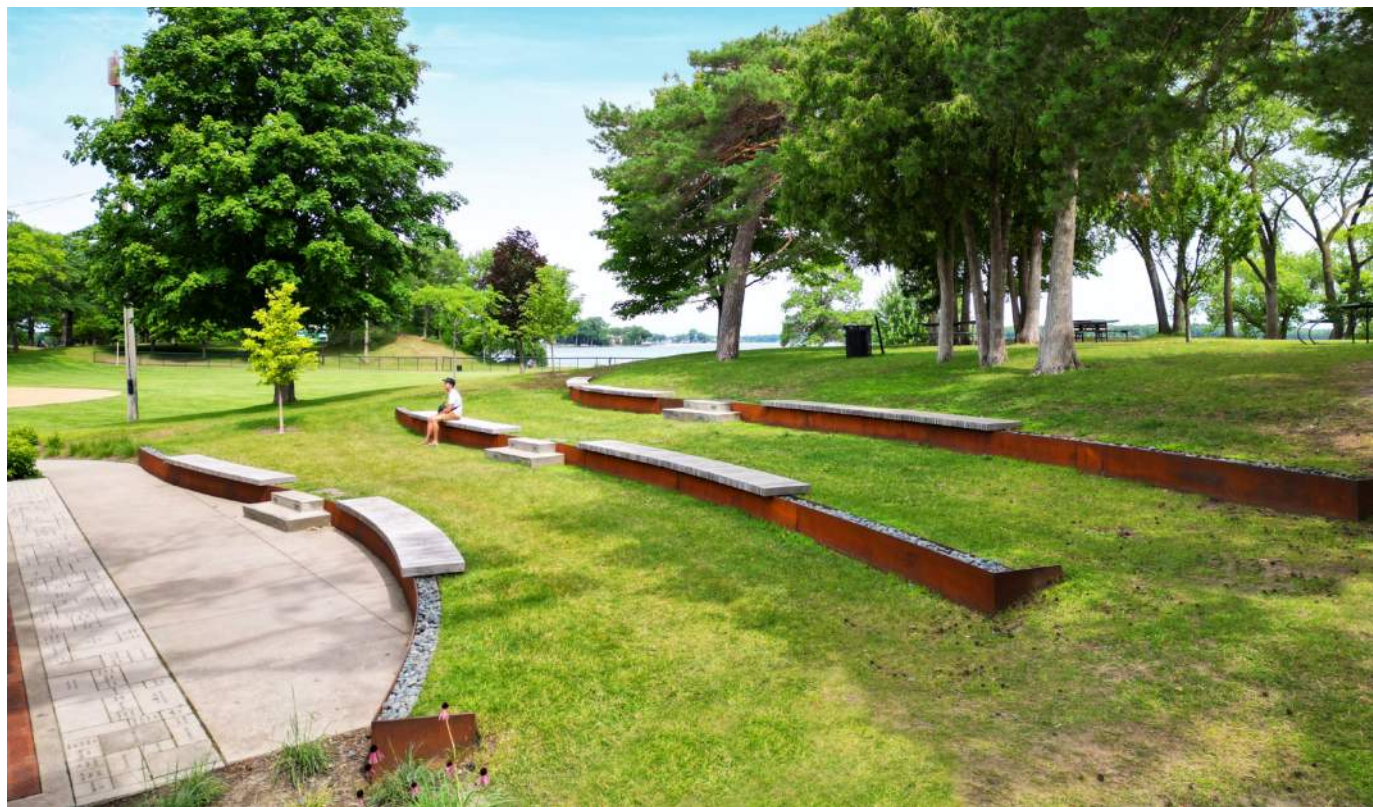


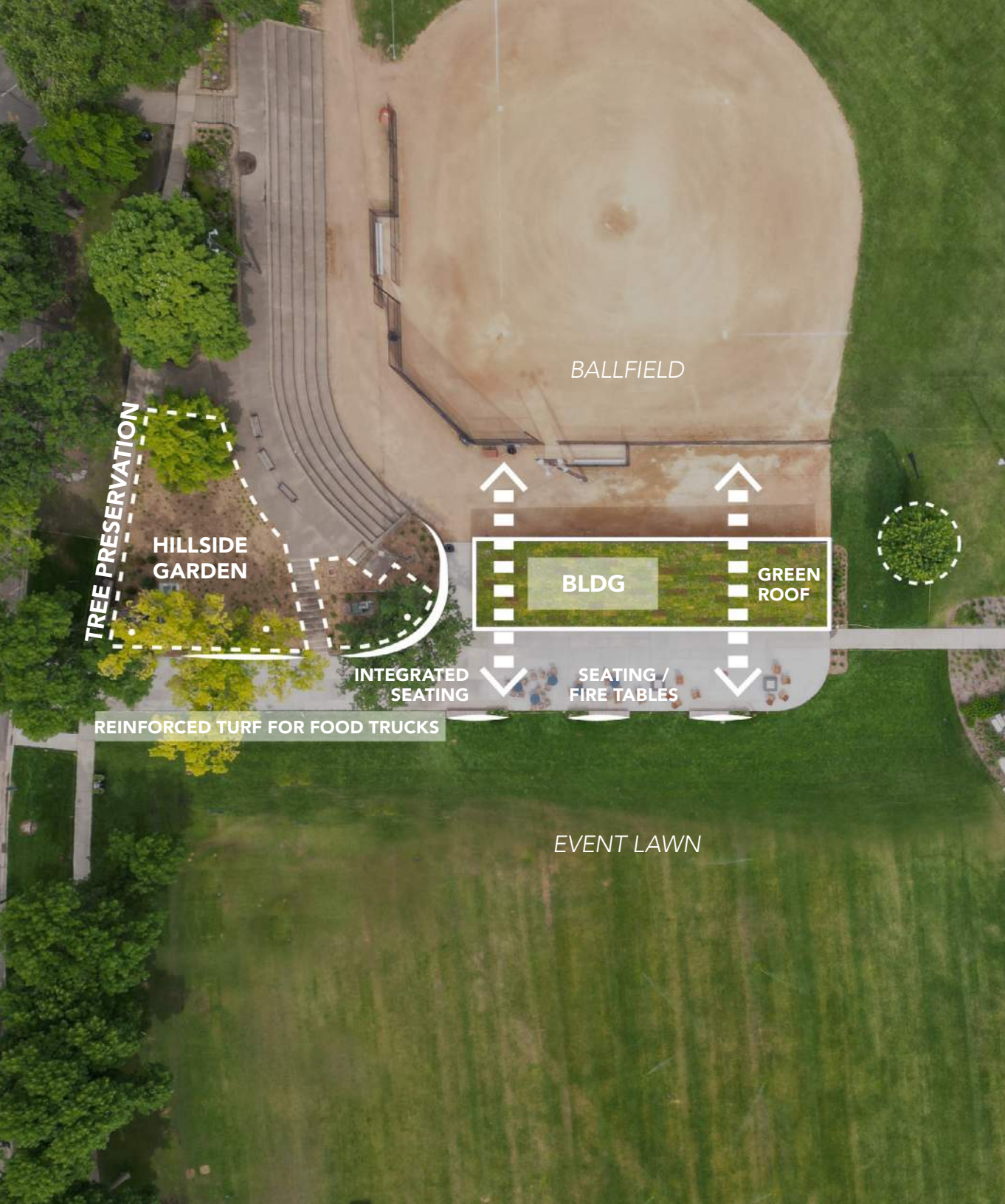


FROM BANDSHELL /



/ TO PAVILION



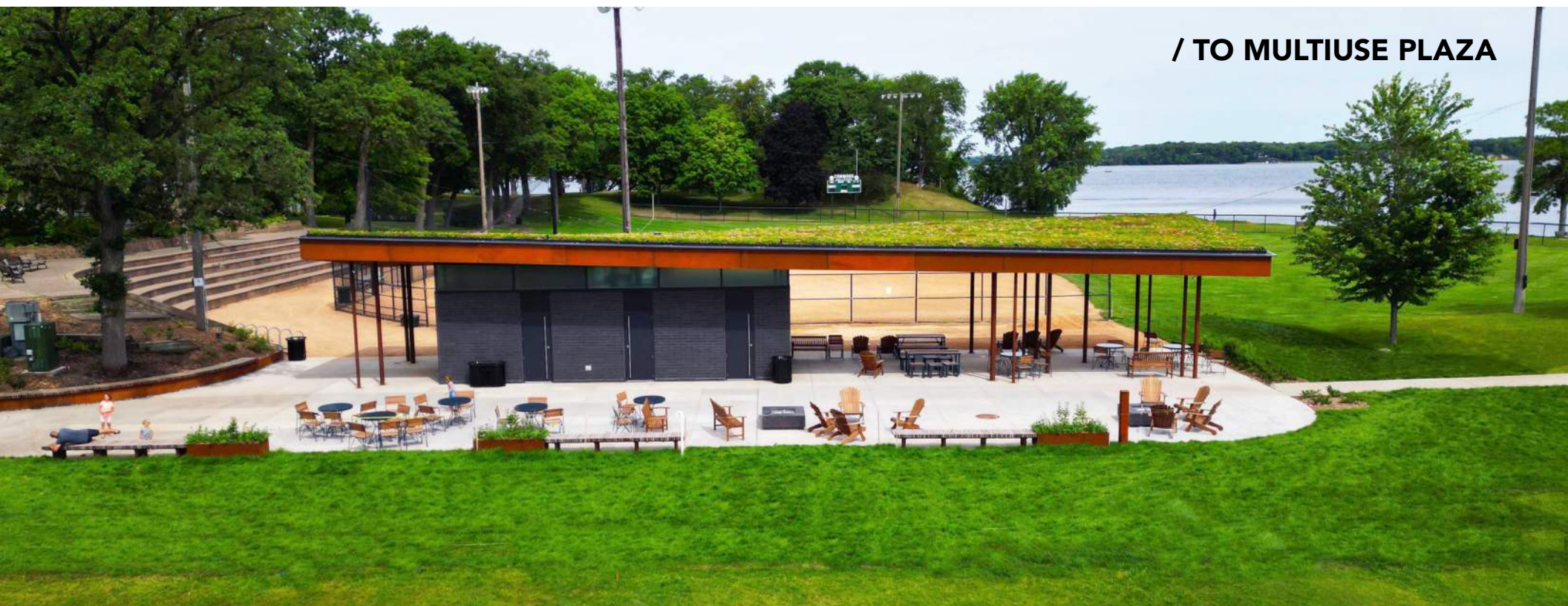


BRING COMMUNITY TOGETHER/ CONCESSIONS PLAZA

Located between the ballfield, event lawn, and Pavilion, the Concessions Plaza has become a nexus of activity within the park. The space has been designed to accommodate a breadth of opportunities for park goers, from a morning coffee conversation, to gathering as a community for the July 4th fireworks.



FROM PARK BUILDING /



/ TO MULTIUSE PLAZA



PROTECT, CONNECT, ESTABLISH / OAK KNOLL



Protect

the character-defining oak trees within the knoll area from further damage.

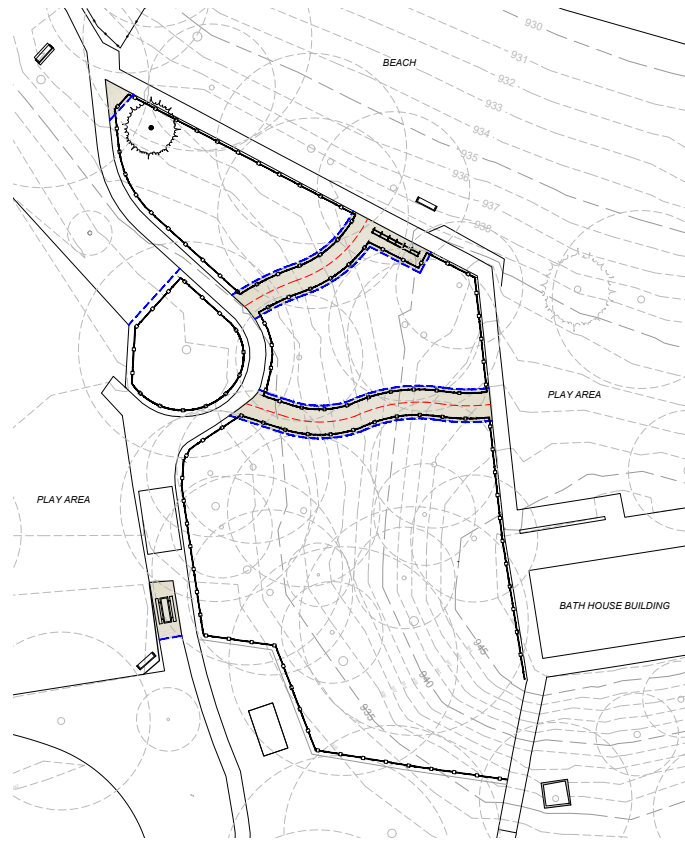


WOOD & ROPE FENCE



Connect

the key destinations in the oak knoll area, but control circulation not to compact root zones.



CRUSHED STONE PATHWAY



Establish

a beautiful and ecologically sound planting that is both preservation-minded and future-forward.



- SAVANNA / WOODLAND SEED
- FESCUE GRASS SEED
- HARDWOOD MULCH
- CONTAINERIZED PLANT
- HERITAGE TREE



ERODING LAWN, DECLINING OAK TREES/



**/ ECOLOGICAL FUNCTION, INVIGORATED
+ PROTECTED OAK TREES**



“ The end result is a beautiful, modern update to the park that is widely embraced by the public and worthy of our extraordinary, historic Commons. ”

- Eric Synder

*Community for the Commons Board
Member, Commons Renovation
Advisory Committee*