

SAUK RAPIDS “THE CLEARING”

SAUK RAPIDS, MINNESOTA

CATEGORY : GENERAL DESIGN

Abstract

Nestled along the Mississippi River and bordering downtown Sauk Rapids, this once-industrial waterfront has long been a hidden resource for the city. The design of this park aims to revitalize the underutilized and ecologically compromised riverfront, transforming it into a lively public gathering space and green oasis at the city’s core. Dubbed “The Clearing,” this project included shoreline restoration, improved access, and revitalized viewsheds, breathing new life into this vibrant civic space and enhancing the ecological and social fabric of downtown Sauk Rapids. This reimagined riverfront park serves as a shining example of economic revitalization and community pride.

Narrative

History

The Clearing was once the home of Tribal Nations. The word “Sauk” in Ojibwe means “a meeting place.” With the arrival of European settlers, the site became a trading post, a steamboat port, and eventually a railroad station and industrial site for lumber and granite. These latter uses resulted in significant environmental damage as contamination hardened the site. This coincided with industrial and economic changes that eventually led to its abandonment. It sat as open land it was eventually turned into a passive public park and greenspace. By 2018, the park was in need of significant restoration and improvement.

In 2019, a community driven master plan was created under the guidance of landscape architects which healed the landscape, reconnected the community to the Mississippi river, and reestablish this site as a central community gathering destination. Landscape Architects led comprehensive community engagement that built support for the project and shaped the design. Engagement included strong relationship development between the city, public, and key stakeholder groups through a variety of activities including, online engagement, social media, pop up events, and curated interviews. In 2020, the Park Master Plan was approved for design and development. The Landscape Architect lead the master planning and design of the site. Architects and Engineers were brought on to assist in construction documentation under the direction of the Landscape Architect.

Design

This design addressed both social need and environmental neglect while restoring habitat and the natural systems, creating a resilient shoreline, and providing a place for social interaction and fostering community pride.

Connectivity

This project connects the adjacent neighborhoods to the river through thoughtful trail connections, alignments, and crossings. New pedestrian crossings of the local rail lines enhance connections to downtown improving safety and access to the river. It is connected to the greater city and surrounding region by enhancing connections to regional trails and direct connection to the river for water access and state water trail access.

Programming

The Clearing offers a range of activities that appeal to a diverse user groups. Active uses are clustered throughout the site. These include areas for inclusive play and water play, flexible open space, fishing, canoe and kayaking, running and walking, biking, a central pavilion and meeting space. A community amphitheater is a regional destination and known for its summer concert series.

Equity was an important goal of the project. The park provides affordable family entertainment, with no-cost community programs. This is evident during Thursday night programming as thousands gather for free concerts with live music, and a variety of activities and food options.

Accessibility

The new playground and interactive splash pad are fully accessible for children and adults of all skills and abilities. This universal access extends throughout the park providing inclusive experiences with powerful sensory moments in nature along the river’s edge. This includes an accessible canoe and kayak launch, fishing piers, and viewing areas. A former bridge abutment serves as a restored overlook that soars above the river while enjoying iconic views of the park and mighty Mississippi.

Environment

The design reintroduced natural drainage systems, pretreatment of stormwater to improve water quality and native ecological systems. The shoreline was enhanced by removal of invasive species and replaced with native vegetation to provide habitat and increase ecological diversity. Site contamination from industrial use was mitigated and parking was used to cap the area to minimize the potential runoff of polluted stormwater and serve as a buffer between the active railway and the park. Stormwater is pretreated in infiltration areas of native planting, enhanced shoreline planting, and a restored creek tributary by capturing pollutants and filtering the water before it enters the Mississippi river. A dying Ash Forest canopy was replaced, and the site was reforested with local hardwoods and riverfront natives.

The landscape architect reused large pieces of unearthed granite to shape the identity of the site and reference its history as a quarry. These artifacts help to define the public spaces and are used as touchpoints along the river for fishing, overlooks and water access that highlight and strategically separate areas of human interaction from natural spaces.

Impact

The project’s impact has exceeded all expectations. Since its opening, the community has wholeheartedly embraced the park as “the meeting place” and a central destination for civic gatherings, recreation, entertainment, and life events such as weddings and celebrations. Notably, the Thursday night free concert series has become one of the most popular events in the region. The park’s value is evidenced by its remarkable success in attracting people, with research data showing an annual park usage increase of nearly five times the number of users since its establishment.

Sauk Rapids

Mississippi River

downtown
sauk rapids

SITE



downtown
sauk rapids

SITE

Mississippi River

Sauk Rapids Regional Bridge

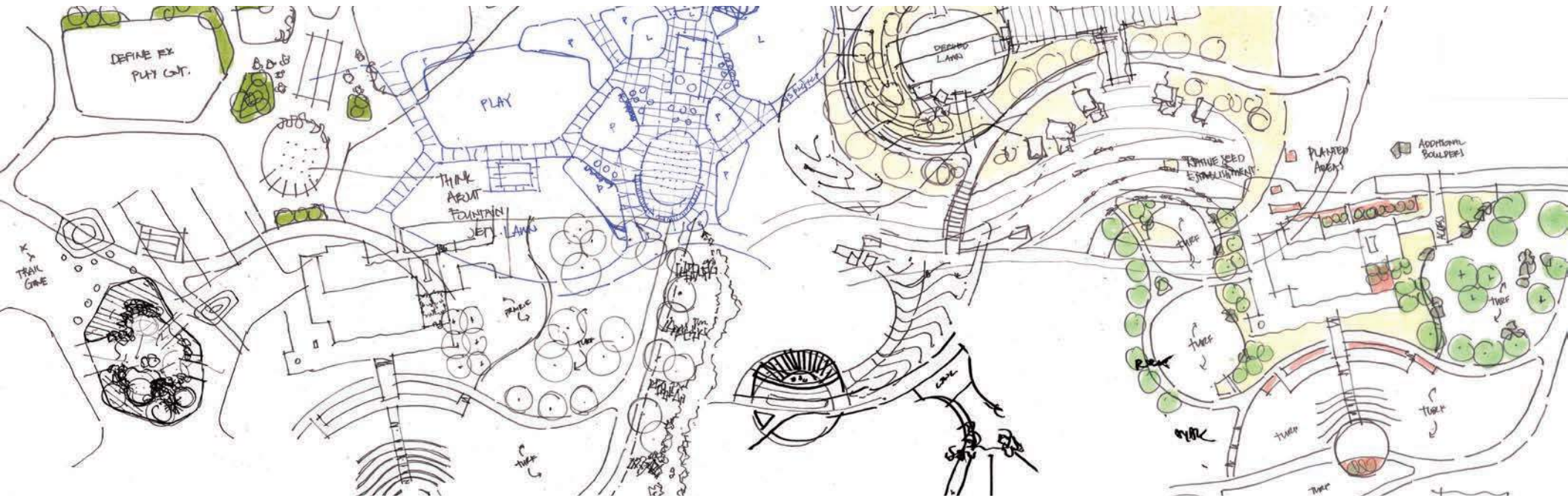
2 miles to
downtown St. Cloud

Benton Drive

Sauk River

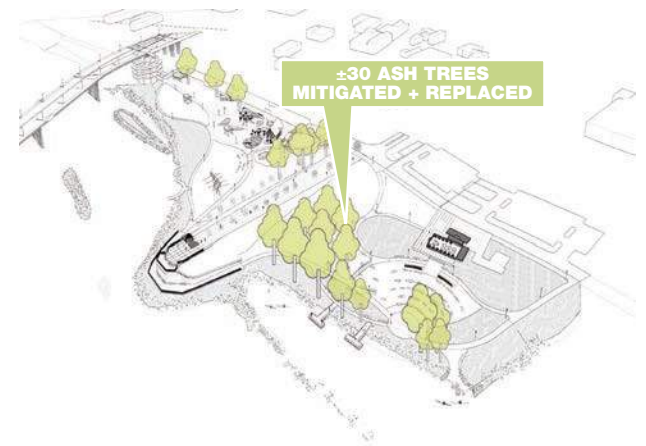
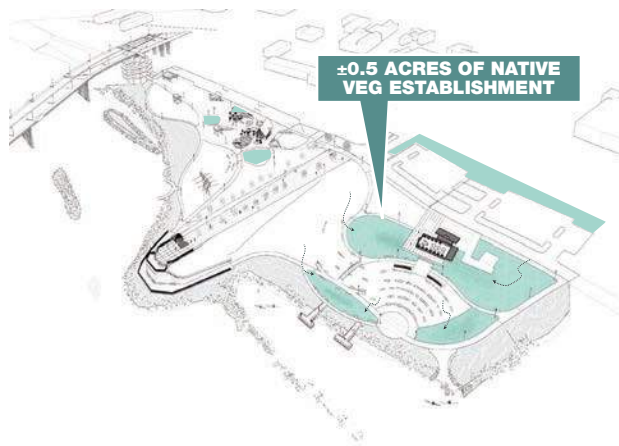
Heims Mill Park

Sauk Rapids Municipal Park



DESIGN EXPLORATION. INITIAL EXPLORATION OF THE SITE CAME THROUGH IN QUICK SKETCH AND 3D RENDERINGS. FORM WAS ULTIMATELY DERIVED FROM THE NATURAL TOPOGRAPHY, AND CREATING ACCESSIBILITY THROUGHOUT THE PARK.

Master Plan





GRANITE CITY. CENTRAL MINNESOTA IS HOME TO SOME OF THE STRONGEST GRANITE IN THE WORLD. TO MEET THE PROGRAM, REMINANT BURIED SITE GRANITE WAS REDISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT THE SITE AS SEATING, WATER ACCESS AND SITE FEATURES BY DIRECTION OF THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT.



AS **LANDSCAPE FEATURES**



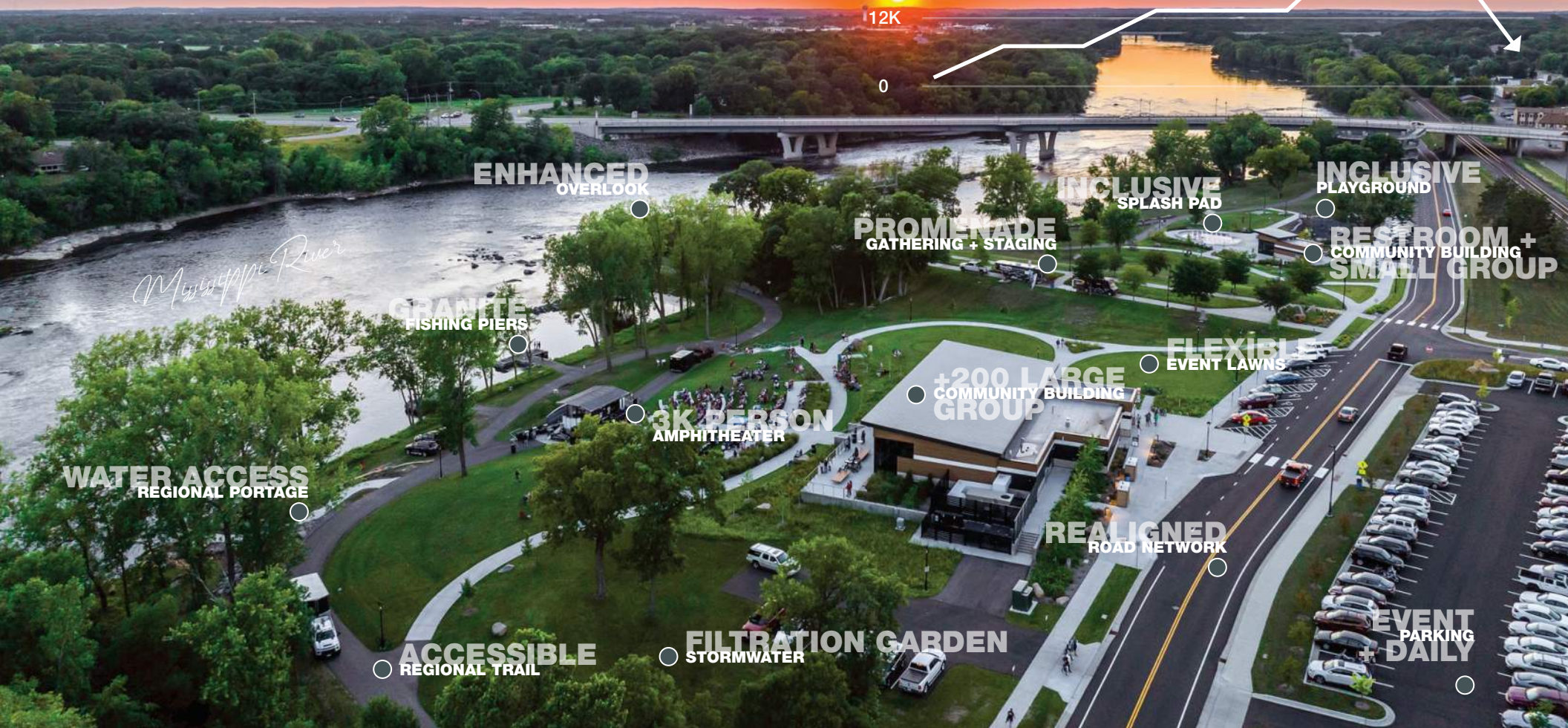
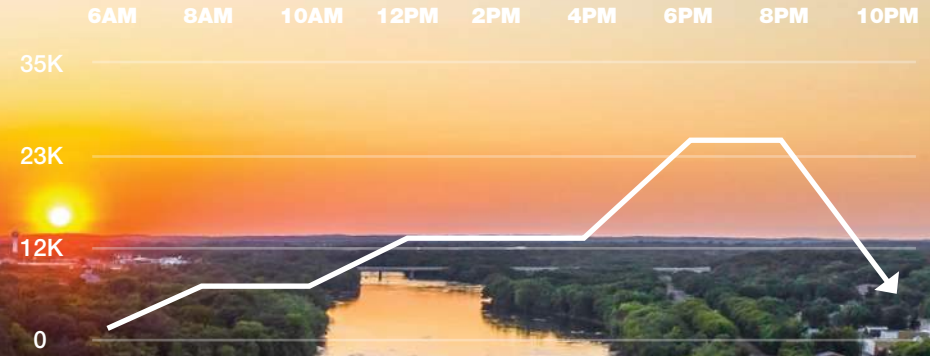
AS **SEATING ELEMENTS**



AS **EROSION CONTROL + RIVER ACCESS**

Welcome to the Clearing

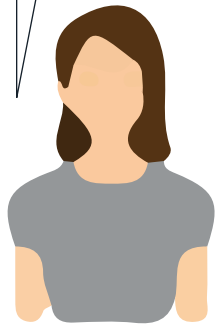
70 MINUTES
AVERAGE LENGTH OF STAY



WELCOME TO THE CLEARING. THE COMMUNITY PARK OFFERS A VARIETY OF USES FOR ALL AGES AND ABILITIES THAT APPEAL TO THE DAILY AND WEEKLY USERS. IT IS HAS BECOME A PREMIER EVENT DESTINATION FOR CENTRAL MINNESOTANS.

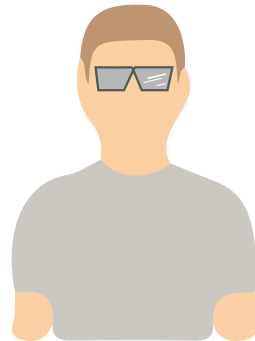
COMMUNITY PRIDE. SAUK RAPIDS IS PROUD OF THEIR NEW SPACE AND IS EXCITED TO CONTINUE THE MOMENTUM AND IDENTIFY WAYS TO STRENGTHEN THE BOND THROUGH THE CONTINUED PROGRAMMING OF THE CLEARING.

“The Clearing has added utmost significance to the heart of Sauk Rapids. It amplifies the beauty of the Mississippi River and has become an integral part of our community park system. **Its amenities have impacted all ages—both local and regional** – with places to celebrate, dance, enjoy entertainment, host events, exercise on the playground, splash, appreciate nature, discover trails, or simply enjoy the serenity of the majestic river views.”



Marla Elness

Sauk Rapids Local Business Owner

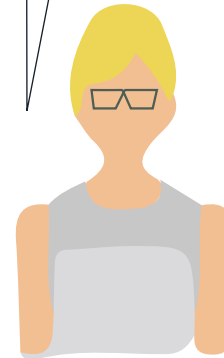


Ross Olson

Sauk Rapids City Administrator

The Clearing provides various opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, the summer Rock the Riverside (2-3k) concert program, and accessible play for all. **It has truly instilled pride back into our city and our community has fully supported the effort.**

I see families picnicking, fishing, listening to the band at Rock the Riverside or even having a wedding there, my own included. The Clearing has become and will continue to be the **backdrop for family memories for decades to come.**



Ellen Thronson

Sauk Rapids Resident



Kurt Hunstinger

Sauk Rapids Mayor

The Clearing has been a great addition not only to the City of Sauk Rapids but the whole region. Prior to The Clearing, the park was very underutilized. That area of the city had very few choices for recreation. **Now there is something for all ages** - the water feature for children with a small building for parties, an updated playground, new trails, an area for our outdoor summer concerts and a larger building to accommodate weddings, retirement parties and corporate events. We love it!

Building Community



ROCK THE RIVER

**2K-3K AVERAGE
ATTENDANCE / WEEK**

BUILDING COMMUNITY. A SELF ORGANIZED SERIES, ROCK THE RIVERSIDE ON THURSDAY NIGHTS TRANSFORM THE PARK INTO A LIVE + **FREE** CONCERT EVENT FOR RESIDENTS AND NEARBY COMMUNITIES. THE MISSISSIPPI OFFERS A BEAUTIFUL SETTING AND BACKDROP TO THE FAMILY FUN MUSIC EVENT.

PUBLIC AMPHITHEATER. CENTRAL MINNESOTA RESIDENTS ALONG WITH NEARBY AND DISTANT NEIGHBORS COME TOGETHER FOR A VARIETY OF EVENTS TO ENJOY THE PARK AND BUILD COMMUNITY.



Reconnection with the River



**8 CONTACT POINTS
WITH THE RIVER**



RECONNECTION WITH THE RIVER. THE CLEARING HAS REMINDED THE SAUK RAPIDS COMMUNITY OF A ONCE FORGOTTEN CONNECTION TO THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER. THE DESIGN OFFERS MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE THE RIVER ONCE AGAIN.

Site Amenities



SITE AMENITIES. THE DESIGN PROVIDED EVENT SPACES, INTEGRATED A NATIVE PLANT PALETTE, DARK SKY COMPLIANT LIGHT FIXTURES, GRANITE OVERLOOKS AND FISHING PIERS, CONNECTION TO REGIONAL TRAILS AND ALL SEASON ACTIVATION.

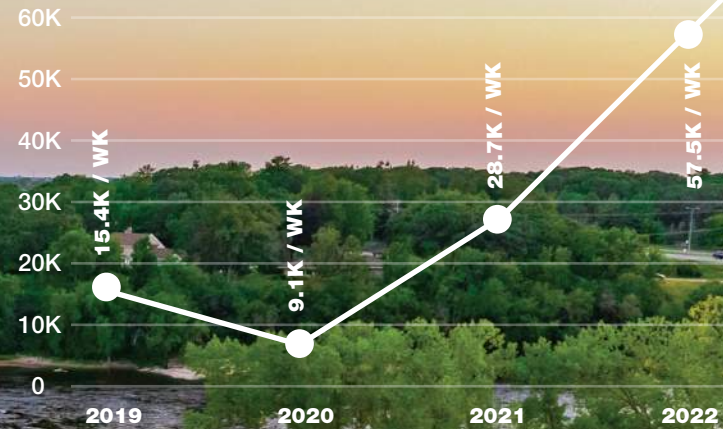


PLAY FOR ALL. THE SAUK RAPIDS COMMUNITY FEATURES AN INCLUSIVE PLAYGROUND AND RECIRCULATING SPLASH PAD THAT PROVIDES ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL AGES.

Successful Results

+100K VISITORS SINCE PARK REOPENING

PARK VISITS / WEEK



CONSTRUCTION
YEAR

SUCCESSFUL RESULTS. SINCE CONSTRUCTION COMPLETION, THE CITY CONTINUES TO TRACK THE PARK ATTENDANCE THROUGH PLACER.AI TECHNOLOGY. THE PARK HAS SEEN AN APPROXIMATE 400% UPTICK IN WEEKLY USAGE ANNUALLY AND HAS DRAWN USERS FROM OVER 75 MILES AWAY THROUGHOUT MINNESOTA.