Renovation of West Park

By the early 2000s, features in West Park were aging and in need of major repair or replacement, and safety concerns were a continuing issue. Stormwater management was a major concern due to extensive building and pavement west of downtown. It was time for a redesign for West Park. Parks planner Amy Kuras launched a collaborative endeavor, drawing in interested parties such as Washtenaw County Water Resources and consulting with Friends of West Park, neighbors, and interested residents. The overall aim was to make West Park more inviting for everyone while also easing stormwater and water quality issues.

In 2008, in three public meetings focused on West Park, residents voiced three main priorities: 1) deal with flooding in the park, 2) improve access, and 3) preserve the recreational amenities. A master plan was then drafted:

West Park Recreation & Stormwater Master Plan

Reporting on plans in August 2009, Amy Kuras said that the existing features of the park would all remain, with the exception of a dilapidated spray fountain. Some locations would change --the basketball court would be moved out of the floodway and the parking lot reconfigured. A boardwalk going through a wetland area would be added as part of revamping the network of paths. Tiered concrete retention walls for seating would be added to stabilize the hill facing the Band Shell, and deteriorating steps coming down from Huron Street would be replaced. The historic Indian trail would be given attention to better feature it. A Project Grow garden would be added to enhance community presence in the park, and a piece of public art designed specifically for West Park would be added.

The stormwater management part to the renovation came first. Prior to the construction work on that a row of large black willow trees (Salix nigra) about a hundred years old outlined West Park's old stream bed that once nurtured them. The trees were badly decayed, toppling over, with limbs regularly falling on the pathway. They also blocked the construction area for the stormwater management work. The trees were slated for removal, and many people expressed upset and sadness about that. To ease everyone's pain, Amy Kuras had cuttings

of the trees taken by city workers as they removed them. A landscaping friend nurtured the cuttings into saplings, and the saplings were transplanted into West Park.

Today (2022) there are 25 or more willow trees scattered throughout West Park that are offshoots of those large black willow trees. Some of the offshoots are now 30 or more feet high. The legacy of the elder black willows lives on throughout the wet areas of West Park. The large elderly oak trees that characterize the park and live mostly on the uplands were in a more healthy state, so care was taken to preserve them.

Old black willow trees (Salix nigra) outlining the invisible stream bed, December 20, 1966.
Ann Arbor News archives courtesy of OldNews. AADL.org

The piece of public art for the park was inspired by trees. The city's 1-percent-for-art policy set aside funds, and the search for an artist was on. A local sculptor and installation artist, Traven Pelletier, was chosen. His creation 'TREEform' came to grace the hillside seating for the Band Shell. The artist said he viewed the project as a challenge "to make something light, elegant, playful, attractive, fun, out of structural steel". When the park's renovation project was done, 'TREEform' was unveiled at West Park's grand opening marking the end of the renovation on Sunday, June 19, 2011. Activities also included a ribbon cutting ceremony, guided tours, a visit by the Ann Arbor Police Department, Ann Arbor Civic Band performance, tree plantings, musical entertainment, a raffle drawing, and walks and talks highlighting the new stormwater features in the park. West Park was renovated and up and running again!