

January 7, 2025

To: Mayor and Members of City Council 202600004
From: Sheryl M.M. Long, City Manager
Subject: **Sawyer Point Playground Replacement**

REFERENCE DOCUMENT #202402487

City Council, at its session on December 11, 2024, referred the following item for review and report:

MOTION, submitted by Councilmembers Cramerding and Albi, WE MOVE that the administration prepare a report in the wake of the fire and destruction of the 1,000 hands playground at Sawyer Point, resulting in the damage and closure of the I-471 Daniel Carter Beard Bridge. The report should address options for restoring this significant resource for the families of Cincinnati and include the following:

- 1) The resources, timeline and alternative possible locations necessary for the replacement of the playground, including other possible uses for the former site;
- 2) The possibility that the replacement playground could be themed to support the 2025 River Roots celebration;
- 3) In the spirit of the “1,000 hands concept” that built the original playground, the possibility that the rebuild could utilize volunteer labor;
- 4) Options for the new playground to be as accessible as possible so it can be available for children of all abilities.

OVERVIEW

Work is well underway to replace the iconic 1,000 Hands Playground in Sawyer Point Park, which was suddenly and tragically lost to a massive fire. The project represents a generational opportunity to create a uniquely Cincinnati destination for park users of all ages, and a wide range of abilities, to enjoy.

The new playground is being designed with partner [Midstates Recreation](#), who is under contract and has begun work on the project. They are the exclusive regional provider of [Earthscape](#), known for crafting inspiring natural playgrounds that encourage creative play and meaningful social interaction. In addition, Parks is in the process of retaining [MKS](#), a leading landscape architect firm to help advise and design accessibility to and from the new playground, as well as to help design a longer term plan for the former playground site under the 471 bridge and surrounding areas in Sawyer Point Park.

ENGAGEMENT

Earlier this year, Parks asked for public feedback about what they loved about Sawyer Point and their ideas for how to design the new playground. Almost 500 responses were received from individuals all over the region. This feedback was shared with Midstates and Earthscape to inform the development of the attached initial concept sketches. These initial concepts are not what the completed playground will ultimately become. These conceptual sketches represent explorations of the playground's flagship piece. In future iterations, more complimentary elements informed by community input will be added to fill out the playground experience.

The full summary of the initial feedback received may be found [here](#). Key themes included:

- **Connection to the Riverfront:** The riverwalk, water access, and scenic views were frequently mentioned.
- **Park Activities:** Events, music, school field trips, pickleball, fireworks, and volleyball were highlighted as favorite Sawyer Point experiences.
- **Safety & Comfort:** Shade, fencing, and weather protection were valued features.
- **Playground Themes:** Riverboats, nature and local animals, Cincinnati's industrial history (including flying pigs and soap), and castles (a nod to the original playground) topped the list.
- **Desired Features:** Swings, slides, climbing structures, shaded areas, and water play elements were favorites.

With the design process now underway, Cincinnati Parks is again asking for public input to ensure the new playground reflects the community's vision. The public is encouraged to share their thoughts on the themes, features, and elements that will make this playground a lasting source of Cincinnati pride. Feedback may be submitted using [this brief survey](#) by December 14, 2025.

RESOURCES

The estimated cost of the new playground is \$2.1 million, with funding to come from both public and private sources. Cincinnati Parks Foundation, the official philanthropic partner of Cincinnati Parks, is leading fundraising efforts. We currently Anyone interested in contributing to this generational project are encouraged to learn more about their fundraising efforts [here](#).

TIMELINE

The playground is tentatively planned to open in spring of 2027. The goal is to have the project design complete in early 2026. Fabrication of the custom equipment is expected to take 6-8 months followed by construction and installation. This schedule is dependent on fundraising as work to build and install the playground cannot commence until all the funding is received.

LOCATION

Parks staff conducted a location study of Sawyer Point to determine the best location and selected the area east of the former 1,000 Hands Playground site to the south of the volleyball

courts and pickleball/tennis courts. This was also the location of the original playground when Sawyer Point Park opened in 1988. This location offers between 11,000 and 14,000 sq ft and is centrally located within Sawyer Point with close connectivity to the Kroger Promenade, the P&G stage, the volleyball courts, the tennis and pickleball courts, the Schott Amphitheater, and the skating rink.

FORMER PLAYGROUND SITE

Cincinnati Parks regained control of the site of the former playground from ODOT in September 2025. Currently, it is being used as park space in a temporary condition created by Parks staff that includes gravel and mulch surfaces and basic landscaping. MKSK, the landscape architect, will work with Parks to develop the best long-term use for this space and the surrounding areas of Sawyer Point Park.

RIVER ROOTS THEME

Parks explored the possibility that the replacement playground be themed to support the 2025 River Roots celebration immediately after the fire. However, consultations with custom playground designers and builders revealed that creating a truly iconic and unique feature—essential for the envisioned signature project—could not be completed in time for the 2025 American River Roots Festival.

UTILIZING VOLUNTEER LABOR

In the spirit of the “1,000 hands concept” that built the original playground, Parks considered the possibility that the rebuild could utilize volunteer labor. In selecting a vendor, firms were chosen because of the iconic nature of their products. This custom-built project will require professional expertise to design and install. However, Parks wants to preserve the community-wide feel of the original playground, which is why a robust community engagement effort with multiple rounds of feedback is being carried out. The goal is for the community to feel like they had a hand in developing this design the same way so many had a hand in building the 1,000 Hands Playground.

It is worth noting Cincinnati Parks as a whole has a sizable volunteer program to aid in park improvements, programs, and events. Last year, 3,321 volunteers contributed 54,931 hours valued at \$1,911,049 in support of Cincinnati Parks projects and initiatives.

OPTIONS FOR AN ACCESSIBLE PLAYGROUND

Cincinnati Parks is committed to accessibility and continually seeks opportunities to create and enhance inclusive features for park users of all ages and abilities. The initial community feedback emphasized that accessibility and inclusion are shared priorities for this project. The new playground will feature a variety of unique and engaging accessible elements. Additionally, Parks is working with MKSK to design accessible routes to and from the playground and to explore ways to improve accessibility throughout the surrounding park.

CONCLUSION

Cincinnati Parks is moving forward with a bold vision for a thoughtfully designed, inclusive, and community-informed replacement for the 1,000 Hands Playground at Sawyer Point Park.

This project represents a unique opportunity to create something truly special and iconic along our riverfront serving the next generation of children and families. We appreciate the continued interest and support from the Mayor and City Council as the project advances over the next several months.

cc: Jason Barron, Parks Director

Attachments: Initial Sawyer Point Playground Conceptual Sketches