



PHASE 2 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Please note: This FAQ has been composed by volunteers working on the Witmer Park Project and reflects those volunteers' understanding of the project. It is not an official statement or correspondence from the City of Des Moines or its Parks & Recreation Department, though it is informed by close collaboration with City staff.

Q: Why are the restroom and playground being positioned where they are?

A: Three main considerations dictate why the restroom and playground are positioned where they are. The first is **safety**. The features need to be installed where a patrolling squad car can see them clearly from the street. City planners have generated a viewshed model of Witmer which identifies the areas of the park within the line-of-sight of a police officer driving down the adjacent streets. The restroom and playground cannot be placed anywhere in the park that does not lie in one of these identified line-of-sight areas. The second is **engineering feasibility**. The restroom requires nearby tie-ins to the existing sewer and electrical infrastructure, and both the restroom and playground require a relatively flat surface on which to build, which is elusive given the rolling topography of Witmer Park. The third is the **positioning of other park features**, both already existing and planned. The Phase 1 improvements—and the Iowa DNR REAP grant on which they depend—preclude the possibility of placing the restroom or playground at the northern end of the park. A desire to maintain enough open space for recreational activities precludes some other locations. After investigating multiple options, it was determined that **the only location which meets all three of these criteria is the location currently proposed.**

Q: Is there any way to reorient the different features, switching the positions of the restroom and shelter or restroom and playground, for instance? Or can everything be moved a little further east into the park?

A: The answer to the first question is: unfortunately not. There are a few reasons why, but the main ones have to do with topography and the sewer tie-in for the restroom. Switching the positions of the restroom and shelter would require longer sewer and water connections and a sewer lifting station. Switching the restroom and playground would also require longer

connections. Both options would require massive amounts of fill soil to alter the topography in that part of the park. All of this is cost-prohibitive, to put it mildly. Other reasons include: the preservation of historic white pines, which would have to be removed in order to switch the restroom and shelter; the desirability of the natural sound barrier to the playground that the restroom will provide for 37th Street residents; and the safety of children using the playground, who we'd like to keep as far from the street as possible.

As to the second question (can everything move further east?), the answer is: yes, but not by much. City planners were able to slide the restroom and playground another 5 feet further east than what was shown at the March 13th, 2019 public meeting. Any further than that, however, and significant topographical alterations would have to be made to the park in addition to re-engineering costs/labor and a reduction in remaining open park space. Also, in that event, the restroom would have to run parallel to 37th Street for line-of-sight reasons, meaning the “long side” of the restroom would be exposed to residents of 37th Street instead of the “short side” as is currently planned.

Q: Can the restroom be smaller, or can it be hidden from 37th Street at all?

A: At 470 sq. ft., the proposed size of the restroom—which is a standardized design used in multiple Des Moines parks—is the minimum size that will meet the needs expressed by the community. The side facing 37th Street will be under 15 feet wide. The westernmost part of the structure will be about 50 feet from the easternmost edge of the street (about 65 feet from the centerline of the street, and about 130 feet from the eastern face of the nearest private residence, with street trees in between). As a policy, the City of Des Moines no longer uses “porta-potty”-style facilities as a permanent restroom solution due to vandalism, maintenance, and other issues. Design schematics for the restroom are available upon request (just ask a member of the Witmer Park Project committee!), and a facility of the same dimensions is currently in construction at Tower Park (4900 Hickman Rd.) for those who want to see one in person. The City has committed to planting either an understory tree or cluster of flowering shrubs directly to the west of the restroom (between the facility and 37th Street) as an additional visual screen, however, no landscaping plans can be made that would impede line-of-sight safety considerations.

Q: One of the great things about Witmer Park is all the open space, which people use for kite-flying, softball, flag football, etc. Won't these new features impede upon those uses?

A: The location of the restroom and playground were selected in part *because* they allow for the retention of lots of open space (see the first answer in this FAQ for further explanation). Careful consideration was given during the planning phase to ensure that visitors to Witmer still have ample room for activities that require it. As a bonus, the current backstop used by softball and kickball enthusiasts will be repaired after it is moved a little to the north (it will be oriented in the same direction as it currently is, and it will remain a full-size ballfield).

Q: Wasn't there a shelter/restroom at Witmer Park previously that was torn down? Why build one again?

A: Yes and yes. The old warming shelter/restroom was located just east of where the current playground is. One of the most frequent things we heard when soliciting community input for the Witmer Park Project was that the old shelter was buried in the middle of the park, not visible from any streets. As a result, it attracted some unsavory behavior, evidenced by the graffiti and refuse left behind and reported by park neighbors. Additionally, the old shelter was made out of non-durable materials (wood) and had become so weathered and vandalized that it needed to be demolished. In accordance with current policy, the new restroom and shelters will be built outside of these blind spots, where unwanted behavior is greatly deterred and easily monitored. The new structures will also be built from durable materials (masonry and steel), which have a much longer lifespan and reduced maintenance costs. The combination of better placement, better materials, and better policies will alleviate the problems that the old warming shelter had while providing park visitors with the accommodations for relief and relaxation that have now been missing for years.

Q: How do we know that the restroom will be properly maintained, or any of the other new features for that matter?

A: The restroom—which will be locked every night and opened in the morning—will be checked twice a day by Parks Operations staff and cleaned every morning when opened. Trash will also be collected every day (either morning or night, depending on need and staff schedule). Beyond that, the park will be maintained by the skills and resources of City staff as with every other park in the Des Moines parks system (though some tasks, like mowing, are contracted out to third party service providers). One of the coolest things about both phases of the Witmer improvements is that good design will yield a more robust park with *lower* operations costs. For example: reducing the amount of mowing necessary by converting multiple acres to native prairie, using durable building materials to decrease the need for structural repairs, and addressing erosion by using appropriate vegetation on relevant slopes. As a bonus, the Witmer Park Project will come with new picnic tables, grill pits, and bike racks.

Q: What can we do about parking? When the park is being used by a lot of people, cars end up parked all over 37th Street, with some people even parking on the grass of the park. Won't these improvements exacerbate that problem?

A: Some photos of 37th Street at its most congested have been shared with our committee, and it's definitely not an ideal situation (to say the least). The good news is that there are several aspects of the project that we are optimistic will actually improve the parking issue. Phase 1 and Phase 2 plans call for adding stalls to the parking lot on 34th Street. Additionally, the

improved walking path system also on the docket will finally “link up” the entire park via a paved trail that will connect the existing parking lot to 37th Street and Washington Ave, making the entire park—including the new restroom and playground—accessible from the 34th Street parking lot. While we’re confident that these upgrades (along with new bike racks to facilitate cycling to the park) will help reduce the parking issues on 37th Street during times of peak park use, we acknowledge that they’re unlikely to totally solve the problem.

Insofar as this issue already exists independently of the proposed Witmer Park Project improvements, it is ultimately a matter of enforcement of the parking regulations already in place. Having said that, we have reached out to the City’s Traffic & Transportation Department and asked them to investigate. One of their engineering technicians has already made a site visit and scheduled a compact radar unit to collect more data later this spring or early summer. They will update us with their conclusions and proposed course of action once more information has been gathered.

One thing we do know is that a second parking lot at the park isn’t a viable (or desirable) solution, for a number of reasons. One constraint is financial. The amount of money required to put in a second parking lot would mean removing at least one of the other planned features entirely, if not multiple features (which would, in turn, jeopardize funding sources for the entire project). The second, more important constraint has to do with the way the City of Des Moines classifies its parks. Witmer Park is considered a “neighborhood park,” which, as the name implies, means it’s intended to “serve the recreational needs of people living or working within a half-mile radius of the park.” A “neighborhood park” is two classifications down from a park like Gray’s Lake (“regional park”), and one classification down from even a park like Ashby (“community park”). So, as a guiding principle, the City doesn’t place two parking lots in a “neighborhood park,” even a somewhat large one like Witmer. This guideline reflects a desire—to which our committee is resolutely committed in the case of Witmer—to maintain “neighborhood parks” as predominantly walk-to/bike-to locations. Commensurate with its designation as a “neighborhood park,” our goal is to improve Witmer for its neighbors, not to attract visitors from further away. Even if a second parking lot were possible, there are some reasons to believe it wouldn’t be desirable, such as the possibility that it may actually *encourage* additional vehicular traffic and visits to the park by car (similar to the way adding lanes to a road can make traffic congestion worse), and the reduction in open field space within the park it would necessitate.

Please contact a member of the Witmer Park Project with any additional questions, comments, or concerns.

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WITMER PARK MASTER PLAN

