

# HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK PLAN

Duluth, Minnesota

Approved by Duluth City Council - August 21, 2023



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## Introduction

### Park Overview

Hillside Sport Court Park is a 2.45-acre park space located in the Central Hillside neighborhood of Duluth, Minnesota. The park system's comprehensive plan, Essential Spaces: Duluth Parks, Recreation, Open Space & Trails Plan, classifies this park as a Neighborhood Park, which is intended to provide both passive and active recreation opportunities, primarily for individuals living within walking and bicycling distance from the park. Existing site amenities include a sport court and unofficial parking area, a small community center building (permanently closed), open greenspace, and a playground (see Figure 1). Due to the park's topography and location on the hillside, the park is physically separated into an upper area (along East 8<sup>th</sup> Street) and lower area (along East 7<sup>th</sup> Street).



FIGURE 1: EXISTING LAYOUT OF HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)

## Historical Context

The area that is now Hillside Sport Court Park was once occupied by the Franklin School, which operated from 1889 – 1977<sup>1</sup>. The school building was demolished in 1979, two years after the school closed due to a low student enrollment<sup>1</sup>.

The City of Duluth acquired a portion of the property in 1973 and built a small community center in 1974. The park space that currently serves as a sport court once contained an Olympic sized hockey rink, with the community center doubling as a warming house. It was not until 2015 that Hillside Sport Court Park was formally rezoned to a Park and Open Space District by City Ordinance, which serves to protect and preserve the space for recreational, scenic, and natural resource use into the future.

## Existing Conditions

Based on a 2021-22 conditions assessment, Hillside Sport Court was assessed as being in “fair” condition, which indicates that, overall, the park space has deficiencies and park facilities should be replaced in the near future, but that those deficiencies do not affect functionality or cause safety concerns.



FRANKLIN SCHOOL (1914)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Franklin Elementary School. Zenith City Online (2022, March 3). Retrieved May 10, 2023 from <https://zenithcity.com/archive/lost-architecture/franklin-elementary/>

<sup>2</sup> McKenzie, Hugh, 1879-1957. 1914. "Franklin School, Duluth, Minnesota." University of Minnesota Duluth, Kathryn A. Martin Library, Northeast Minnesota Historical Collections, Accessed May 30, 2023. <https://collection.mndigital.org/catalog/nemhc:2487>

### Site Connectivity and Accessibility

There are two stairway entrances to the park from East 7<sup>th</sup> Street, which lead directly to open greenspace, and which need minor repairs. Along East 7<sup>th</sup> Street, there is no accessible entrance to the park, and the western portion of the park is not visible from street-level due to a tall and steep hillside. The lack of visibility to this area creates a disconnect between the park and the neighborhood below. From the public sidewalk along North 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue East, an accessible sidewalk leads to an accessible swing on the playground. Adjacent to the public sidewalk on East 8<sup>th</sup> Street is an area of deteriorating concrete, on which hockey boxes sat several decades ago. Today, this area is used mainly as a sidewalk, accessway into the sport court, and bicycle parking. Generally speaking, the park lacks formalized connections and accessible pathways into the park, between park amenities, and between the upper and lower areas of the park.

### Community Center Building

A notable exception to the “fair” condition rating at Hillside Sport Court Park is the community center building. At nearly a half a century old, the 930 square foot community center building has been permanently closed due to concerns of public safety. The small size and deteriorated condition of the building makes it incompatible with modern community center building needs and is an ideal candidate for removal from the park system.

### Sport Court

The existing, fenced-in sport court was installed in 1998, and was most recently crack-sealed, seal-coated, and restriped in 2021. However, due to underlying foundational issues, slumping and cracks will likely continue to be a problem. While repeated sealing will help for shorter periods of time, long-term solutions include fully renewing the sport court or removing it entirely. Given the court’s popularity among community members, renewal is the preferred option.



SPORT COURT AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)

## Playground

The playground equipment was also installed in 1998 and is a well-used and popular amenity within the park. The playground is designed for ages 5 - 12 and includes one primary play structure and one bay of swings, including one accessible swing. While Duluth's Park Maintenance staff conducts routine playground inspections and replaces parts as needed to ensure all playground equipment is safe for use, at 25 years old, the existing equipment has surpassed its recommended lifespan and is due for replacement.



PLAYGROUND AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)

## Open Greenspace

The park's open greenspace is a unique feature for Duluth's hillside, where large tracts of flat, grassy land are limited. The open greenspace has two tiers, with the area west of the alley being slightly elevated above the area east of the alley. Open greenspace is a valuable asset that supports recreational opportunities, community health, and climate resiliency. However, the park's two-tiered, open greenspace is currently under-programmed and not activated to its full potential. Park elements that improve activation and create a stronger sense of place, such as a pavilion or a community garden, could be added to the park, with the notable trade-off that the inclusion of these elements would reduce the total amount of flexible greenspace available. Determining the proper balance between open, undisturbed greenspace and more developed park elements is important for maximizing park usage and overall community benefit.

### Parking

While the park was not designed with a formal parking lot, the area adjacent to the fenced-in sport court has taken on that role. This area retains two basketball hoops, but lacks fencing and has not been maintained as a sport court. To access this parking area, one is required to turn into a residential alley and then into the lot. This parking space is identified as an overflow lot for parking during official snow emergencies, which should be considered when analyzing parking improvement options. Along East 8<sup>th</sup> Street, the boulevard strip (the grass between the public street and sidewalk) essentially disappears at the park boundaries, allowing the street to widen and provide more space for parallel street parking.

### Trees

The park has 11 green ash trees, as well as one each of sugar maple, red maple, bur oak, and blue spruce. The infestation of the emerald ash borer (EAB) beetle, which can kill an ash tree in a few short years, has devastated the ash tree population across the country. Unfortunately, the ash trees of Duluth and of Hillside Sport Court Park are no exception. Duluth's Park Maintenance team has injected the park's ash trees with a systemic insecticide treatment to prolong the life of the trees. However, even with treatment, all of the park's ash trees will eventually deteriorate and require removal, likely within the next 5 – 10 years. Replanting the park with diverse tree species will be vital for maintaining Duluth's tree canopy and for enhancing the overall quality and comfort of the park space.



INFORMAL PARKING AREA AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)



EXISTING TREES AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)



### Retaining Walls

Along East 7<sup>th</sup> Street, the parkland is supported by two different retaining walls. The more eastern side of the park has a classic-Duluth stone retaining wall, which is in relatively good condition and would benefit from maintenance-level tuckpointing. The more western side of the park has a deteriorating timber retaining wall, which supports a much larger and steeper hillside that acts as both a physical and visual barrier between the park and people at street-level.

### Fencing

The perimeter of the lower park space is almost entirely fenced-in. Sections of fencing along the alley are damaged and in need of maintenance or replacement. The fencing along East 7<sup>th</sup> Street, above the stone retaining wall, is in relatively good condition. However, the setback of the fence causes mowing difficulties and allows for uncontrolled growth of grass and weeds along the exterior side of the fence. A backstop and dugout fencing are all that remain of a former ballfield within the park's western area of open greenspace.

### Signage & Gates

The park's only freestanding entrance sign is located along East 7<sup>th</sup> Street. The park has one gated entrance along the alley, which provides access for groundskeeping equipment and other authorized machinery or vehicles, as needed. The sign and gate do not align with the City's adopted Gate, Wayfinding and Signage Plan, and should be updated accordingly.



STONE RETAINING WALL AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)



TIMBER RETAINING WALL AND ENTRANCE SIGN AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)



BACKSTOP AND DUGOUT FENCING OF FORMER BALLFIELD AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)

## Neighborhood Context

### Census Tracts

Hillside Sport Court Park is located in Census Tract 9, which includes a portion of the Central Hillside neighborhood and extends into the Duluth Heights neighborhood. The park is directly across the street from Census Tract 16, which is wholly within the Central Hillside neighborhood. For the purposes of this demographic analysis, both Census Tracts will be considered because the park directly serves households in each area.

### Population & Population Density

The combined population of Census Tract 9 (3,598 people) and Census Tract 16 (1,446 people) makes up 5.8% of Duluth’s total population of 86,697 people (see Figure 3).

The population density (the number of people per square mile of land area) of Census Tract 9 and Census Tract 16 are both greater than the population density of Duluth overall (see Figure 4). The population density for Census Tract 16 is notably higher and suggests that Hillside Sport Court Park may serve a greater concentration of people than the average Neighborhood Park in Duluth.



FIGURE 2: CENSUS TRACT MAP

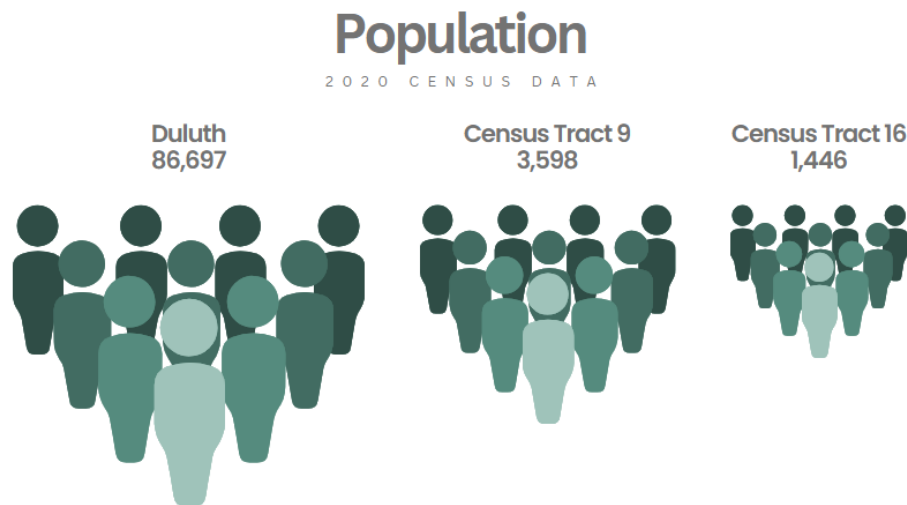


FIGURE 3: POPULATION (SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2020 CENSUS)

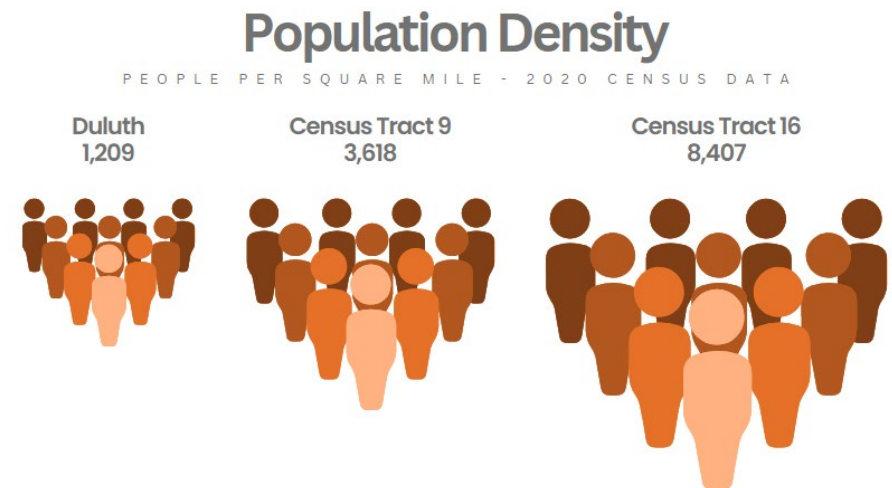


FIGURE 4: POPULATION DENSITY (SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2020 CENSUS)

### Housing Developments

Within a half-mile radius of Hillside Sport Court Park, housing density appears to be increasing. Over the past decade, four housing developments have been added, with a combined total of 233 units, including 44 units for families with children experiencing homelessness. In the near future, three more housing developments will be complete, and will add 193 more units to the area, with a mix of market rate units and affordable units for qualifying households at 60% and 80% of area median income.

### Income & Earnings

The median household income of Census Tract 9 (\$65,191) is slightly greater than that of Duluth as a whole (\$58,014). Conversely, the median household income of Census Tract 16 (\$32,431) is less than that of Duluth overall and, notably, less than half that of Census Tract 9 (see Figure 5). As shown in Figure 6, 6.9% of households in Duluth, 3.6% of households in Census Tract 9, and an astounding 80.6% of households in Census Tract 16 earn less than \$10,000 per year.

## Median Household Income

2017 - 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR ESTIMATES

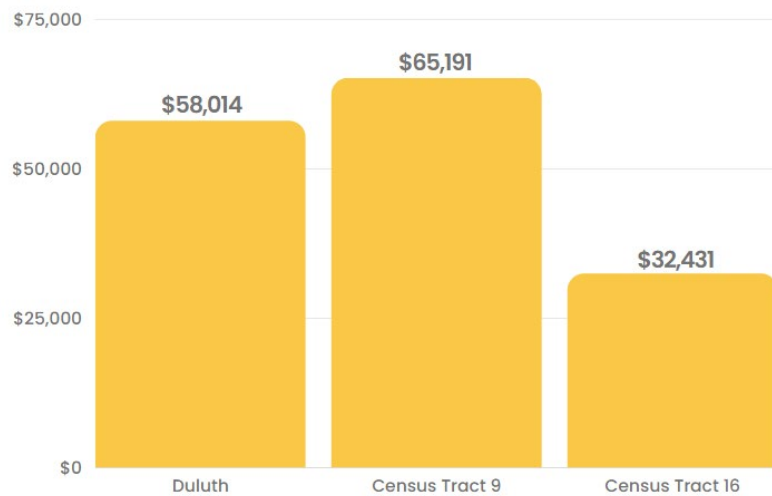


FIGURE 5: MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME  
(SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2017-2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR ESTIMATES)

## Percent of Households Earning Less Than \$10K

2017 - 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR ESTIMATES

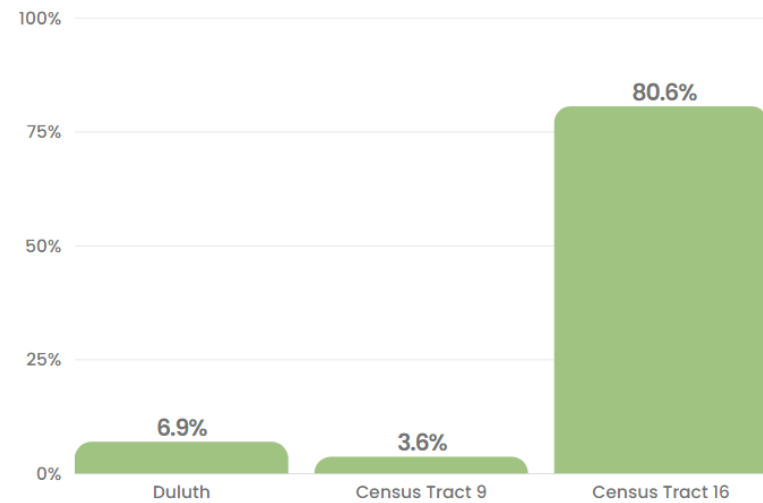


FIGURE 6: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS EARNING LESS THAN \$10,000  
(SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2017-2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR ESTIMATES)

### Race & Ethnicity

As shown in Figure 7, Census Tract 9 is slightly more racially diverse than Duluth as a whole, having greater concentrations of American Indian and Alaskan Native (2.3% compared to 1.7% in Duluth) and persons of Two or More Races (6.8% compared to 4.8% in Duluth). Census Tract 16 is much more racially diverse than both Census Tract 9 and Duluth overall. Black or African Americans make up 11% of the population in Census Tract 16, compared to 1.7% in Census Tract 9 and 2.6% in Duluth, and persons of Two or More Races account for 9.8% of the population in Census Tract 16, compared to 6.8% and 4.8% in Census Tract 9 and Duluth, respectively. With a Hispanic or Latino population of 3.4%, Census Tract 16 is also more ethnically diverse than Census Tract 9 (1.8%) and Duluth (2.7%).

### Vehicle Access

Households in Census Tract 16 are far less likely to have a vehicle than households in Duluth and Census Tract 9. In Census Tract 16, 31.7% of households do not have a vehicle, compared to 10.2% of households in Duluth, and 4.7% of households in Census Tract 9 (see Figure 8). For households without a vehicle, access to quality park and recreation amenities within walking or bicycling distance becomes increasingly important.

## Race & Ethnicity

BY PERCENT OF POPULATION - 2020 CENSUS DATA

RACE & ETHNICITY	DULUTH	CENSUS TRACT 9	CENSUS TRACT 16
White	88.6%	87.0%	68.9%
Black or African American	2.6%	1.7%	11.0%
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.7%	2.3%	7.4%
Asian	1.6%	1.7%	1.7%
Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Other	0.0%	0.5%	1.0%
Two or More Races	4.8%	6.8%	9.8%
Hispanic or Latino	2.7%	1.8%	3.4%

FIGURE 7: RACE AND ETHNICITY (SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2020 CENSUS)

## Percent of Households Without Vehicles

2017 - 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR ESTIMATES

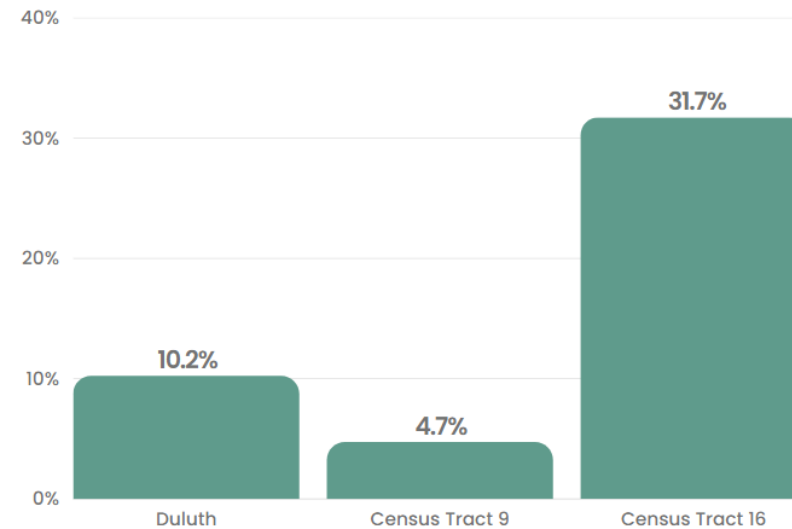


FIGURE 8: PERCENT OF HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT VEHICLES (SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, 2017-2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR ESTIMATES)

Population density, racial and ethnic diversity, income disparities, and vehicle access all influence the ways in which a park space is used, needed, and valued by community members. Considerations of neighborhood context remained at the forefront throughout this planning process.

## Park Plan Process



\*Project proposals are submitted by individuals or organizations wishing to make improvements on City property, typically funded through fundraising efforts organized by the applicant.

## Community Engagement

On May 17, 2023, an interactive community input session was held at Central Hillside Community Center to help guide investment priorities and to better understand community needs and preferences for park improvements. A total of 24 individuals participated, including representatives from the Central Hillside and East Hillside neighborhoods, St. Mark African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the St. Mark Giving Garden & Food Access Project, Parks and Recreation Commission (3<sup>rd</sup> District), Zeitgeist's Healthy Hillside, Duluth Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Health Equity Northland, among others. In an effort to reduce barriers to participation and to increase inclusivity, alternate youth activities were provided for the children of those attending the session.

Participants were provided a brief overview of the park space and presented with several alternative investment priorities for their consideration, including a community-based and community-funded proposal for a giving garden. Participants then gathered in small groups to discuss the investment priorities in more detail and to rank and vote on their preferences. The ranked preferences were weighted and scored to better understand top community priorities.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SESSION PARTICIPANTS DISCUSS PRIORITIES FOR HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK

Scored and ranked preferences revealed the following:

When asked which park elements City funds should address first, weighted scores showed that **community participants would most like to see a pavilion/covered seating added to the park**, followed closely by a renewed sport court, improved parking, and a new playground (see Figure 9). There was minimal interest in the addition of a splash pad. Support for gathering spaces came up often in each of the group discussions, particularly around the ideas of hosting community events and cookouts, and being able to relax comfortably under shade.

### Park Improvement Priorities

BASED ON WEIGHTED SCORES FROM COMMUNITY INPUT SESSION

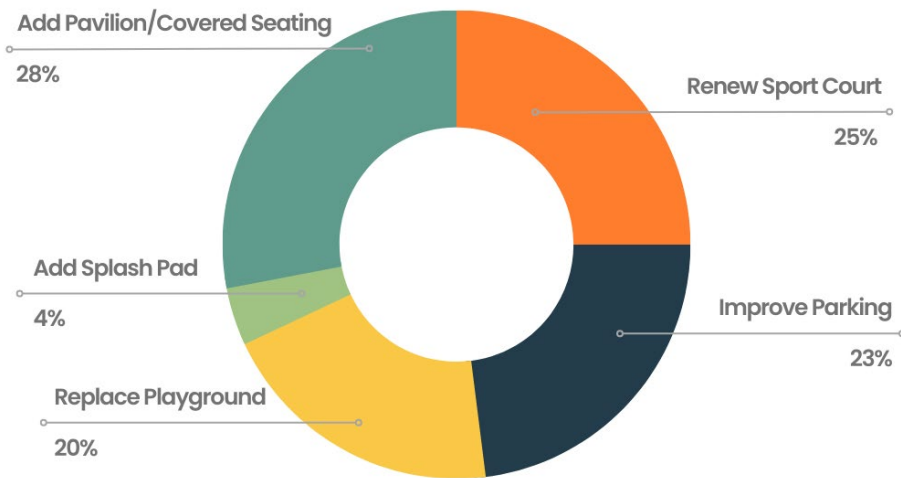


FIGURE 9: PARK IMPROVEMENT PRIORITIES

### Sport Court Use Priorities

BASED ON WEIGHTED SCORES FROM COMMUNITY INPUT SESSION

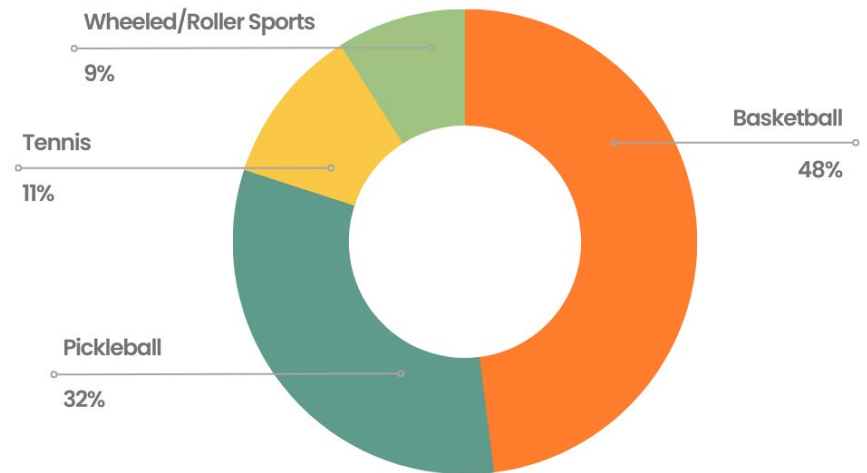


FIGURE 10: SPORT COURT USE PRIORITIES

**Basketball was the top priority for the sport court**, followed by pickleball, tennis, and wheeled/roller sports (see Figure 10). Participants noted that the sport court is sometimes used for wheeled/roller sports, such as rollerblading and biking, because the fencing provides a safe space to teach children these skills. This is valuable information because it tells us that, in order to expand community benefits and meet diverse community preferences, any renewed sport court surface should be durable enough to withstand wheeled/roller sports.

When asked to consider the trade-offs between maintaining open, flexible greenspace and developing the park space for a community garden or other purposes, **participants overwhelmingly supported a balance between open greenspace and community garden space** (see Figures 11 and 12). Maintaining open greenspace resonated with participants because of the flexibility it offers for activities, particularly for children enjoying free play, pick-up field games, and community gathering. Participants did express a desire for more formalized programming and activation of the open greenspace. Note that not all participants responded to all questions.

## Preferred Size of Open Greenspace

BASED ON VOTES FROM COMMUNITY INPUT SESSION

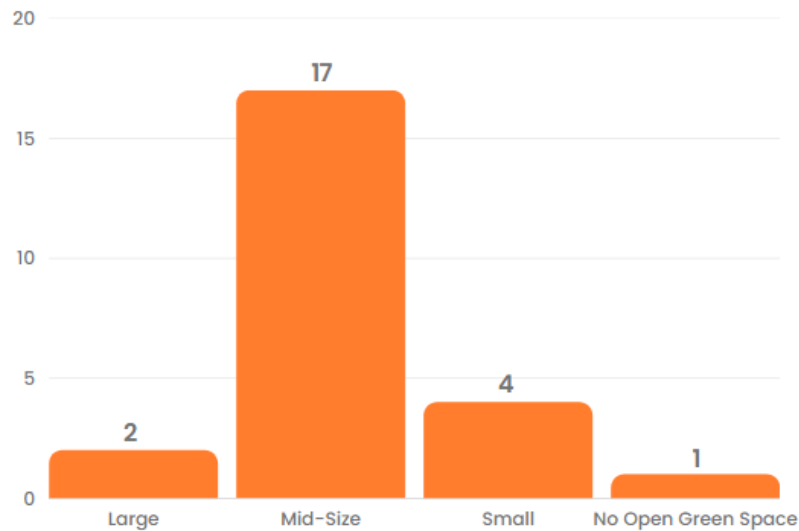


FIGURE 11: PREFERRED SIZE OF OPEN GREENSPACE

## Preferred Size of Community Garden

BASED ON VOTES FROM COMMUNITY INPUT SESSION

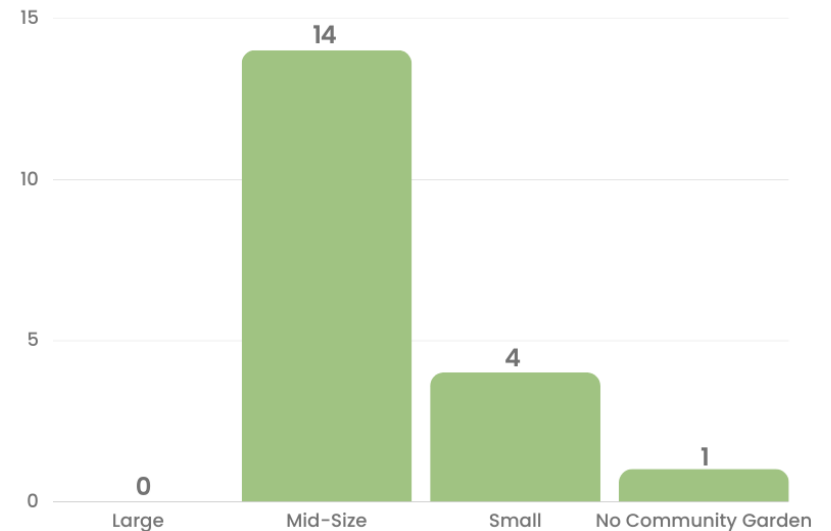


FIGURE 12: PREFERRED SIZE OF COMMUNITY GARDEN

All future park scenarios, as discussed in small groups, assumed a playground would remain in the park. **Access to a playground topped the list of things that participants said they most liked about the existing park.** As part of small group discussions, relocating the playground to the interior of the park received positive feedback, with some participants noting that they liked the idea of increasing distance between the street and the playground for their children’s safety.



When asked about parking improvements, **participants preferred adding new parking areas, either along the alley or angled street parking**, while fewer supported enhancing the existing parking surface area (see Figure 13). During small group discussions, improving parking accessibility and accessibility throughout the site was a common theme.

## Preferred Parking Area Improvements

BASED ON VOTES FROM COMMUNITY INPUT SESSION

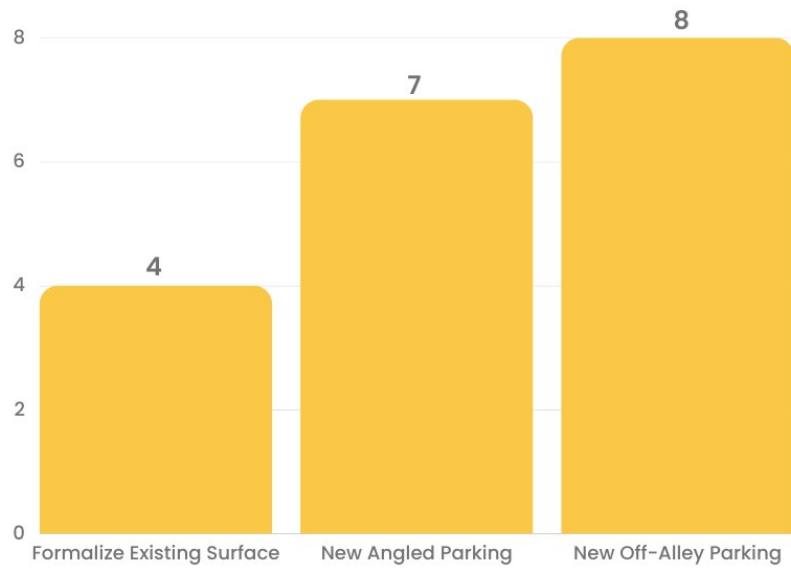


FIGURE 13: PREFERRED PARKING AREA IMPROVEMENTS



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SESSION PARTICIPANTS DISCUSS PARKING IMPROVEMENT PREFERENCES

Overall, session participants expressed community-focused values and support for a safe, inclusive, and multi-use park space that encourages neighbors to come together to celebrate, to play, and to give back to the community. Input gathered from this community session helped inform future park plan recommendations and to prioritize park investments.

## Park Improvement Plan

### Conceptual Park Plan

The conceptual park plan, as shown in Figure 14, is a visual representation of the preferred park improvements for Hillside Sport Court Park. Conceptual park plans are intended to provide a general sense of direction, rather than specific design details, and to confirm that the community's long-term vision of the park space has been accurately captured and understood.

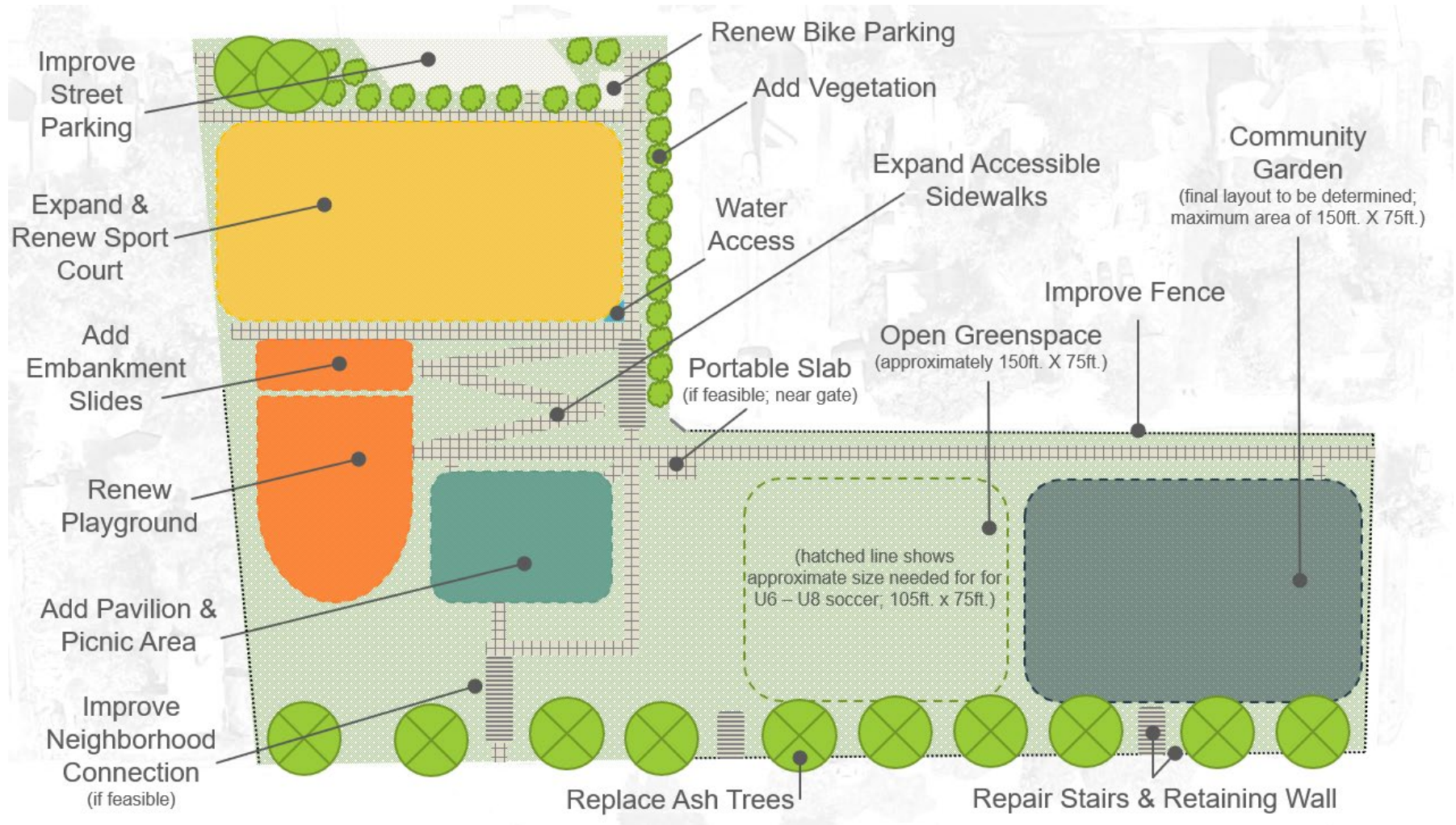


FIGURE 14: CONCEPTUAL PARK PLAN

## Preferred Park Improvements

The preferred park improvements, which represent the ideal outcomes of a reimagined Hillside Sport Court Park at the conceptual level, are described below. The preferred park improvements consider and synthesize information related to existing conditions, community input, potential funding opportunities, maintenance needs, and consistency with the park system's comprehensive plan, Essential Spaces: Duluth Parks, Recreation, Open Space & Trails Plan, which was adopted on October 10, 2022.

### 1. Site Connectivity and Accessibility

Interwoven with each of the park improvements to follow, this plan recommends continued considerations for expanded site connectivity and accessibility throughout the park redevelopment process. Ideal improvements include added connections from the upper park space to the lower park space, between the eastern and western areas of the park, and between the park and the surrounding neighborhood. This plan also recommends improved street parking with accessible parking stalls that connect and provide access to all primary park amenities, including the sport court, playground, and a new pavilion and picnic area. Accessible elements should be incorporated into the playground equipment and accessible seating should be provided in the pavilion and picnic area.

### 2. Community Center Building

Given the financial constraints of the overall park system, the inflated cost to bring the permanently-closed community center building back to useful life, and the beneficial outcomes of removing blighted structures, this plan recommends removal of the building. This recommendation aligns with the Essential Spaces Plan, which calls for continued consolidation of community center buildings, particularly those that are not well-suited to meet modern recreation needs. Further, the Essential Spaces Plan encourages community centers to be located in Community Parks, rather than Neighborhood Parks such as Hillside Sport Court Park. This plan recommends maintaining existing utilities, such as electricity for lighting and special events, and water for a drinking fountain.

### 3. Pavilion and Picnic Area

This park improvement plan supports and uplifts community gathering opportunities by recommending the addition of a small pavilion and picnic area, including accessible and covered seating options, grills, and waste and recycling receptacles. A pavilion or covered seating was the top priority for participants of the Hillside Sport Court Park community engagement session. Likewise, the Essential Spaces Plan recommends abundant picnic tables and benches in Neighborhood Parks and encourages park improvements that foster park activation, social interaction, and community togetherness.

### 4. Sport Court

The sport court is heavily used and valued by community members, and renewal of the sport court was the second highest priority among participants of the community engagement session. To properly address on-going ground movement and continuous cracks and slumps in the court surface, this plan recommends a complete sport court replacement, including the fencing. Further this plan recommends expanding the sport court, which will serve to re-incorporate the informal parking area into an active and recreation-focused amenity, rather than passive and auto-oriented amenity. Based on community feedback, it is recommended that the court be multi-use and striped for basketball (primary use) and pickleball (secondary use), and that the surface be durable enough to withstand wheeled/roller sports.

### 5. Playground Equipment

The playground equipment is heavily utilized by neighborhood children, but is nearing the end of its useful life and is due for replacement. This plan recommends replacing the playground equipment and relocating it to the western side of the park's lower level. Relocating the playground serves three important purposes. First, the new location consolidates the primary park amenities (sport court, pavilion/picnic area, and playground) to the western side of the park, creating a more cohesive and interconnected park environment. Second, from an accessibility perspective, the relocated playground allows for a shorter distance of travel between planned accessible parking stalls and the playground. Finally, the new equipment can be designed to take advantage of the existing topography (i.e. the hill) on the western side of the park, including the possible use of embankment slides and climbing elements (see example in lower right image<sup>3</sup>).



EXISTING HILL AT HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK (2023)

### 6. Open Greenspace

The park's flat, open greenspace is a unique and valuable asset for Duluth's hillside. A strong majority of participants at the community engagement session wished to maintain a mid-sized, open, flexible green space in the park, while also establishing new park amenities that encourage greater park activation and create comfortable spaces for people to gather. This plan calls for a reduction in overall open greenspace to allow for the inclusion of more community-oriented park elements, including a pavilion/picnic area and a community garden, and to maximize overall community benefits. The remaining open greenspace is of a sufficient size to allow for U-6 to U-8 soccer, among other pick-up games and open play.



EXAMPLE OF EMBANKMENT SLIDES AT MAGICAL BRIDGE PLAYGROUND IN PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

<sup>3</sup> Snoopy. 2019. "Magical Bridge Playground – Palo Alto, CA." A Park A Day Bay Area, Accessed June 7, 2023. <https://aparkadaybayarea.com/magical-bridge-playground-palo-alto-ca/>

## 7. Community Garden

A majority of participants at the community engagement session supported a mid-size community garden space. Given the strong project support from Health Equity Northland and St. Mark Giving Garden and Food Access Program, and the extent to which their existing giving garden helps to address food insecurity and reduce barriers to healthy food access, this plan recommends dedicating approximately 11,250 square feet of park space to the development of a community garden. Typical community garden spaces in Duluth's park system include amenities such as seasonal garden beds, rainwater harvesters, sheds, and fruit trees. City staff will continue to work with the program's leadership team to develop and finalize the details of this community garden space and to enter into any necessary agreements. Development of the community garden space will be supported through fundraising efforts of the partner organizations.

## 8. Parking

This plan recommends relocating parking from inside the park (off-street parking) to improved street parking along East 8<sup>th</sup> Street. This will allow for a better and higher use of the park space (sport court or open space), while providing a more accessible, formalized, and safer parking option. The Essential Spaces Plan identifies off-street parking as most appropriate for larger Destination Parks and Community Parks, rather than Neighborhood Parks like Hillside Sport Court Park. Staff did explore the option of adding parking to the park's lower level, just below the alley. However, this would require the general public to utilize an alleyway that is intended for residential use, would significantly reduce the amount of space proposed for open green space and a community garden, and would be a reinvestment in off-street parking within a Neighborhood Park. If funding does not allow the sport court to be expanded, the existing informal parking area could be transformed into additional green space with seating for resting and enjoying views of Lake Superior.

## 9. Fencing

Fencing throughout the park should be renewed. The fence along the stone retaining wall should be reset to include an under-fence grass barrier to control overgrowth, reduce maintenance needs, and improve park aesthetics. The backstop and dugout fencing should be removed and replaced with more appropriately sized fencing, as needed. Alternative fence options may be considered along the alley, to improve overall park aesthetics, and additional considerations should be given to determine if perimeter fencing is needed along North 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue East, based on the needs of the future community garden.

## 10. Park Signage & Gate

Park signage and the park gate should be updated to align with the City's adopted Gate, Wayfinding and Signage Plan. A minimum of two entrance signs, as well as general rules signage, are recommended.

## 11. Retaining Walls & Stairs

This plan recommends tuck pointing the stone retaining wall and completing minor repairs to the existing staircases to address maintenance needs and ensure public safety. The failing timber retaining wall should be replaced or removed. Removal of the timber retaining wall would provide two primary benefits. First, removing built infrastructure from the park system reduces long-term capital improvement needs and expenses. Second, reducing the slope of the existing hill could provide for the possibility of adding an entryway from North 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue East to improve neighborhood connectivity, as well as feelings of safety and inclusion. Currently, the steep hill supported by the retaining wall acts as a physical and visual barrier between the park and the neighborhood below it. Given the relocation of the playground and the addition of a picnic pavilion to this area of the park, improving sight lines and adding an entry point will help to increase community connections, make the park feel more welcoming, and improve actual and perceived safety for individuals and families enjoying the park space. The

regraded space could host a pollinator garden, fruit trees, or other natural elements that support more resilient park spaces. Further study into the ground materials and space requirements is needed to determine if this is a feasible option. If further study reveals that regrading is not feasible, at a minimum, the retaining wall should be repaired or replaced. This work may require additional collaboration with the City's Public Works and Utilities Department.



VIEW FROM NORTH 4<sup>TH</sup> AVENUE EAST OF THE RETAINING WALL AND HILLSIDE SEPARATING EAST 7<sup>TH</sup> STREET FROM FUTURE HILLSIDE SPORT COURT PARK AMENITIES

## 12. Trees and Vegetation

Given that much of the park is planted with ash trees, all of which will need to be removed within a matter of years, this plan recommends the removal and replacement of all the park's ash trees. Considerations may be made for a phased removal process, under direction from the City Forester, to allow any relatively healthy trees remain in place longer. Newly planted trees should be of diverse species and the trees and other vegetation should be strategically placed around the perimeter of the park to create a sense of place and provide dispersed areas of shade. Fruit trees should be considered to enhance community garden efforts and support local food production. The Essential Spaces Plan encourages the planting of trees in park spaces to decrease urban heat islands, improve air quality, and support climate resiliency.

## 13. Restrooms

During the Hillside Sport Court Park community engagement session, the desire for permanent restrooms came up in several of the small group discussions. Given the size of the park system and the limited financial resources to maintain it, it's not feasible to provide permanent restroom facilities at all park spaces across the city. Instead, as directed by the Essential Spaces Plan, investments in permanent restroom facilities are targeted towards, and most appropriate for, larger Destination Parks and Community Parks, which support visitors from wider service areas. Neighborhood Parks are primarily intended to serve individuals and families living within walking and bicycling distance from the park space, making the need for permanent restroom facilities less pressing. The option of a seasonal, portable restroom may be possible if the financial resources required for maintenance are available. If that were the case, it is recommended that the portable restroom be located near the primary park amenities and in a location where it may be easily serviced.

## Implementation

### Estimated Cost of Implementation

The estimated cost of implementation is based on the conceptual design elements, pricing of similar past project work, and anticipated inflation rates at approximately 7-8% annually through 2026 (see Figure 15). Actual costs may vary extensively depending on project timing, actual rates of inflation, broader economic conditions, additional details uncovered during the final design process, materials, fabrication, and the construction team. These estimated costs are intended to assist with further planning and financial decision-making, and should not be interpreted as actual project costs.

Park Improvement	Estimated Cost
Design and construction documents	\$85,000
Accessible sidewalks throughout park	\$200,000
Remove building	\$55,000
Add pavilion and picnic area	\$150,000
Sport court renewal and expansion	\$565,000
Replace and relocate playground	\$380,000
Improve street parking	\$100,000
Repair and replace fencing	\$85,000
Renew park signage and gate	\$30,000
Miscellaneous park amenities (drinking fountain, portable toilet enclosure, bike racks, trash/recycling receptacles, etc.)	\$35,000
Tuckpoint stone retaining walls and repair existing stairs	\$50,000
Address timber retaining wall and/or improve neighborhood connectivity	\$125,000
Tree removal and replacement and other plantings	\$30,000
Contingency (10% of project costs)	\$189,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2,079,000</b>

FIGURE 15: ESTIMATED COST OF IMPLEMENTATION

### Potential Funding Sources

Parks and Recreation should seek multiple funding sources to support the preferred park improvements at Hillside Sport Court Park, including:

#### **City Revenue Replacement Funds**

Revenue replacement funds were allocated to Parks and Recreation to provide improvements to parks in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods. A portion of these dollars are dedicated to Hillside Sport Court Park improvements and can be used as match funds when applying for grants.

#### **Partially Restored Parks Fund**

The Park Fund property tax levy, which is the primary funding source for park improvements in Duluth, is currently structured such that the levy can collect no more than a fixed dollar amount of \$2.6 million per year. As the cost to operate and maintain Duluth's park system continues to increase, with rising construction and personnel costs, the buying power of that \$2.6 million continues to diminish. Parks and Recreation should request additional funding to the Parks Fund, to account for rising costs and partially restore the capital improvement budget, to support improvements at Hillside Sport Court Park. These funds can also be leveraged as match dollars when applying for grant funding.

#### **Grant Opportunities**

A successful grant application could significantly increase the amount of funding available to implement park improvements. City staff should explore grant opportunities that support enhanced recreation opportunities, such as the National Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) Program or the Outdoor Recreation Grant Program. While use of grant funding does extend the project timeline, the increased investment will allow for more and better park improvements and greater community benefits.

#### **Community Development Block Grant Funding**

The City of Duluth's Planning & Economic Development Department receives an annual allocation of federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding, which is intended to improve the lives of all community members, and especially those with low- and moderate-income levels. Through a competitive application process, a portion of these funds are available to support public facilities, including park amenities. Parks and Recreation should consider an application to CDBG to supplement park improvements at Hillside Sport Court Park.

#### **Corporate and Personal Sponsorships**

Parks and Recreation staff should explore opportunities for private and/or corporate sponsorship of park elements, such as the sport court.

#### **Community-Supported Projects**

Parks and Recreation should continue to work with local organizations to support community-based and community-funded project proposals. Staff should work closely with Health Equity Northland and St. Mark Giving Garden and Food Access Program to finalize and approve the community garden project proposal for Hillside Sport Court Park.



### Prioritized Park Improvements

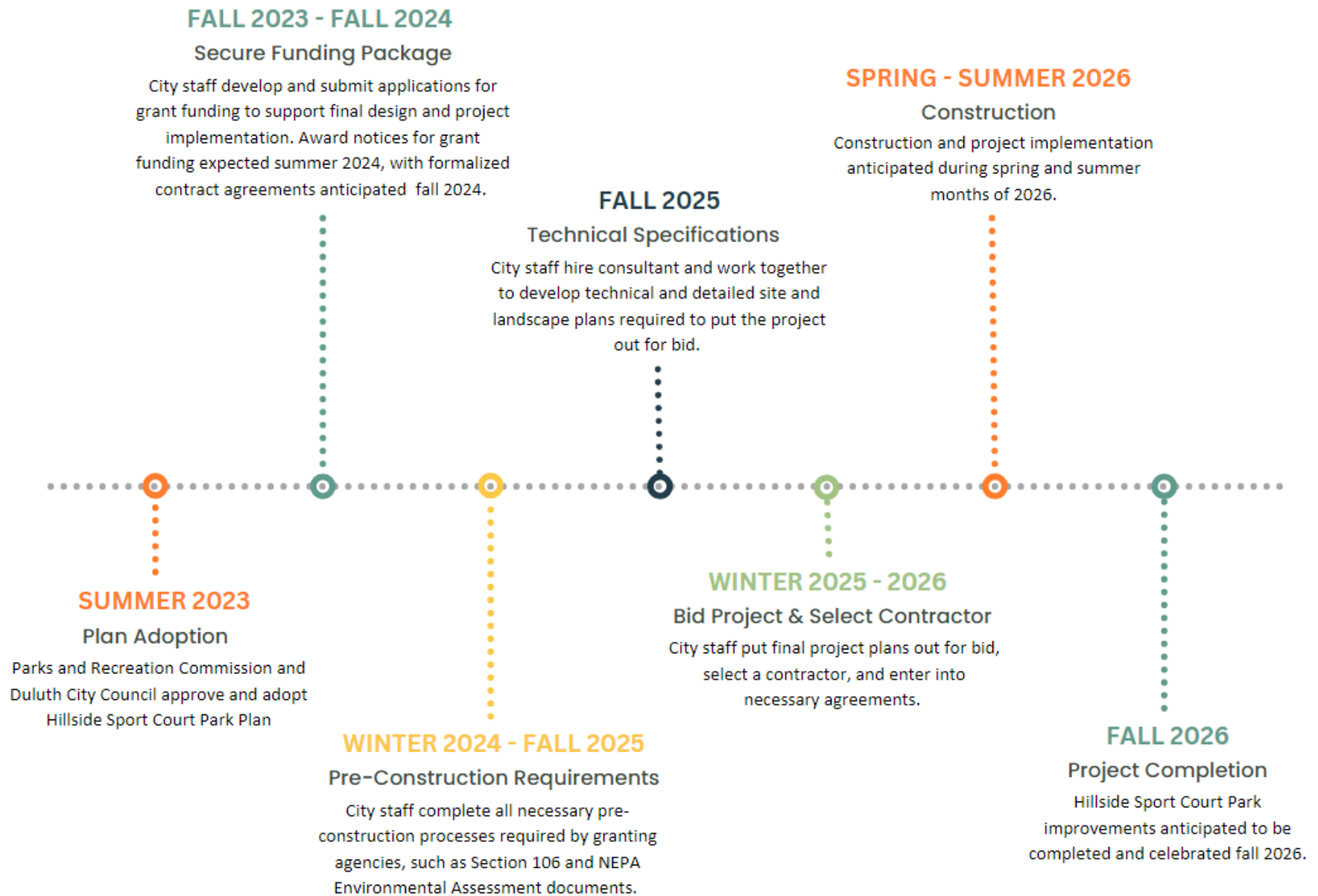
As the conceptual park plan develops, as actual construction and materials costs are determined, and as funding opportunities are fully-explored, one possible outcome is that the cost to implement the full set of preferred park improvements will be greater than the funding available. If that happens, it’s important to understand the prioritized order in which park improvements should be completed to maximize overall benefits. Figure 16 shows prioritized park improvement outcomes under the scenarios of “With Limited Funding” and “Where Additional Funding Allows”. Improvements listed under the “Where Additional Funding Allows” represent the preferred park improvements. These improvements should only be considered, in order of priority, once it is known that total project funding exceeds the amount needed to complete all of the items identified under the “With Limited Funding” column. These prioritized improvements focus on addressing existing park amenities before adding new park amenities, while balancing community desires with short- and long-term maintenance needs and with overall park system goals and objectives.

Prioritized Park Improvements for Hillside Sport Court Park	With Limited Funding	Where Additional Funding Allows
1. Site Connectivity and Accessibility	Improve accessibility to existing park amenities	Improve connections into and throughout the park and provide accessible pathways to all park amenities, including any new amenities
2. Community Gathering Spaces	Remove community building	Remove community building and add a pavilion and picnic area
3. Sport Court	Resurface existing sport court	Fully replace and, if possible, expand sport court
4. Playground	Replace end-of-life playground in existing location	Replace and relocate playground to western side of park and add embankment slides
5. Parking	Resurface existing parking area or convert parking area to greenspace	Relocate parking to improved street parking
6. Other Park Assets	Perform minor repairs, as feasible, to other park assets (fencing, retaining walls, bike racks, signage, gate, etc.)	Fully repair or replace other park assets, remove timber retaining wall and regrade if possible
7. Trees and Vegetation	Do not remove or add any trees or vegetation	Remove some or all ash trees, replant new trees, and add new vegetation

FIGURE 16: PRIORITIZED PARK IMPROVEMENTS TABLE

*Note: The community garden project will be funded through independent fundraising efforts and, therefore, is not included on this list.*

Implementation Timeline





**Duluth Parks  
& Recreation**

This plan can be found online at: <https://duluthmn.gov/parks/>