

# OVERTON PARK

# notes

fall 2020

## Help us plan for Overton Park's future, starting with the attractions on the park's east side

Two years ago, Overton Park Conservancy began asking park visitors to share their vision for an even better Overton Park. Through our conversations with you, we learned that you love the social connections you make at the park, and are eager for even more ways to foster them.

You told us you love coming to the park for recreation and relaxation but would welcome more ways to make the park an all-day, all-weather destination.

Now, with all these ideas in mind, we're ready to embark on the next phase of our park planning effort. Having looked at the park as a whole, now it's time to focus on specific geographic areas of the park and how they can each contribute to creating a more vibrant, equitable space for all Memphians.

Our first geographic area--what we're calling **Zone 1**--is the east side of the park, which includes the Bike Gate plaza; the East Parkway playground, pavilion, and picnic areas; and the 13-acre tract at the park's southeast corner currently known as the



Improvements to the East Parkway Playground will be considered during this phase of the planning effort.

General Services Area. Occupied by a City of Memphis vehicle maintenance facility since the 1930s, this parcel will soon return to the park. Deciding how it should be used will be a major component of our planning effort, and it's a big reason that we selected the east side of the park as our first priority.

The 13-acre parcel contains three City-operated greenhouses, several garages, and a Works Progress Administration-era building that has been used as a metal shop and office space. The area reflects its industrial use; it's paved in asphalt and will require a total reimagining.

We're asking for your help in creating that vision. Inside this newsletter is a survey that asks for your opinion on some potential uses for the 13-acre parcel, as well as other elements of Zone 1. You may return the survey to us by mail using the envelope provided, or complete it online at [overtonpark.org/zone1](https://overtonpark.org/zone1). Please return your answers by November 30, and encourage your friends to complete it online.

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The 13-acre parcel at the park's southeast corner has housed City of Memphis vehicle maintenance, office space, storage, and greenhouse facilities.

Your feedback will be incorporated into concepts and renderings for Zone 1 by our partners at Design Workshop, an international studio integrating landscape architecture, urban design, economics, and engagement. The Design Workshop team will also be working with local stakeholder groups such as the park's cultural organizations, universities, and neighborhood associations to gather ideas.

But we decided that the first people who should weigh in on the park's future were those who would benefit from it most: young people. We're thrilled to partner with the team at Center for Transforming Communities, a Binghamton-based organization that works to equip people and organizations to make change in their communities. CTC is leading engagement events that bring Memphis youth into the park to envision a space that they would want to visit.

On a chilly morning in late October, CTC Executive Director Justin Merrick invited ten high school students to bring their imaginations on a walk through Overton Park. He told them that when younger people are engaged in a project like the park planning effort, the level of imagination soars.

CTC Network Director Harry Cash encouraged the students, many of whom had spent time in Overton Park, to connect to their own memories of the space. The feelings and emotions brought on by those memories would help drive imagination. And, Justin added, "Your ideas help create those experiences for other people."

The students were particularly excited about potential re-use of the greenhouses in the 13-acre

parcel. They had ideas about community gardens and co-ops, and imagined coming to the greenhouses to supplement what they're learning in school.

Students also wanted to see more cultural events and opportunities for recreation in the park, such as sports fields or a tree canopy walk. One student remarked that hearing about the park's history was valuable, but there weren't many places to learn about it within the park itself.

We look forward to working even more with these and other students as we develop the plan. But now it's your turn! To take a virtual tour of the 13-acre parcel, visit [overtonpark.org/zone1](https://overtonpark.org/zone1). Then take the survey to let us know what you see when you envision a whole new piece of parkland.



Overton Park Conservancy is working with Center for Transforming Communities to ask young people what park facilities would best serve them. In October, we toured the southeast corner and visited the greenhouses.

# Parks offer a prescription for good health

As our understanding of the virus that causes COVID-19 has evolved, it's become clear that outdoor spaces are among the safest places to avoid transmission. But parks have health benefits beyond being low-risk places to avoid the virus. Drs. Emily Graves and Susan Lacy co-founded Physicians for Urban



Parks to preserve urban green space and promote public health in Memphis. We asked them about the economic and health benefits of quality urban parks.

## How do parks affect the health of a community?

Access to a high-quality park like Overton Park is associated with significantly higher community health scores. Community engagement is higher, stress and depression are lower, and general physical health improves, which leads to lower healthcare costs. Parks also provide economic benefits by drawing and retaining residents and employers to the area.

## What are some ways that time outdoors contributes to overall health/immunity?

Time spent in green spaces, even just for a few minutes, can provide a lasting boost to your health. Studies have shown time spent outdoors lowers blood pressure, improves mood, and enhances your ability to focus. Researchers have even found a direct relation between time spent in forests and increases in the number and activity of virus-fighting white blood cells.

## Do you see a benefit to being outdoors during the winter, with both COVID-19 and the flu active?

We need exercise and outdoor time year-round, not just in the summer, and the physical, mental, and social benefits may be even more important during the winter, so we hope people continue to get outside even when the temperatures drop. Viruses transmit more easily indoors than outdoors, so hopefully people will bundle up and continue to safely socialize outside in the fresh air. Getting sunlight in the winter helps maintain vitamin D levels somewhat and is particularly helpful for people with seasonal affective disorder.

## How can people safely socialize at a park?

In order to minimize virus exposure and spread, avoid crowded areas and playground equipment,

and maintain at least six feet between yourself and others not in your household. Wash your hands or use hand sanitizer, and don't share water bottles or other food and drink containers or utensils with friends if you have a picnic. And it should go without saying, don't visit the park when you're sick or have tested

positive for COVID-19 or been exposed to someone with the virus.

## Have you visited Overton Park during the pandemic?

EG: Even more than usual. The Greensward has been a great place to meet up with a few friends and just enjoy each other's company (six feet apart, of course!), and the Old Forest has been beautiful this year. The park is a perfect place to "hit the reset button" when stress and anxiety start to build up. It's also a great place to feel a connection with others--you can't help but say hello to other park-goers and remind yourself to get out of your own head sometimes!

## What can we at the Conservancy be doing to encourage safe park use during this time?

The Conservancy has done a fantastic job of keeping Overton Park a place for people to enjoy the outdoors, and one another, safely. Ensuring access to broad, open spaces like the Greensward encourages people to spread out. Maintaining trails and paths gives everyone plenty of options to explore the Old Forest without crowding.

## Do you notice benefits to your own health and well-being from park use?

EG: Absolutely! Aside from the obvious physical health benefits I get from going for a run or bike ride through the park, the mental and social benefits are just as profound. From decreased anxiety to increased connection to other individuals and the community as a whole, spending time in the park is restorative on almost every level.

*Emily Graves, M.D., F.A.C.S., is a board-certified ophthalmologist specializing in cataract and refractive surgery, in private practice at Duncan Eye PLLC. Susan Lacy, M.D., F.A.C.O.G., is a board-certified gynecologist at her own practice, Modern Gynecology & Reproductive Health.*

## When 100 trees fall, what takes their place?

In January, a strong windstorm brought down more than 100 trees between markers 18 and 25 on the Old Forest Loop. The tree fall created a larger opening than any we've seen since Overton Park Conservancy began managing the Old Forest in 2012.

Thanks to your donations, and the incredible efforts of Urban Forestry, Echo Systems, the City of Memphis, and Park Friends, we got the trail open in only a week. Since then, we've been spending a lot of time in this new opening to see what the forest would do with this sudden infusion of sunlight. Here's what we've noticed.

### A Profusion of Jewelweed

Summer and fall visitors to the trail were greeted by thousands of bright orange flowers from a tall herbaceous plant called jewelweed. This plant, native to the Eastern United States, is such a successful colonizer of open spaces that it often becomes the first plant to establish itself after a major disturbance.

Along with the jewelweed come its two favorite pollinators: ruby-throated hummingbirds and bumble bees. Although the plant is visited by many creatures including flies, beetles, and honey bees, hummingbirds and bumble bees are the most effective at moving pollen between flowers and helping the plant reproduce. Why? Hummingbirds are relatively large compared to the flowers, and they get pollen on their heads as they come in and out, and bumble bees are so hairy that pollen sticks right to them.

### Tulip Poplar Regeneration

We've talked a lot about how our largest tree species--the oaks and tulip poplars--are having trouble regenerating. While older trees come down in events like January's storm, newer trees are not making it to

maturity. This new opening offers a chance to see whether one of these species can buck the trend.

Tulip poplars have small, papery seeds that don't carry a lot of stored energy. This means that a new tree generally only has one year to grow tall enough to reach over other plants; otherwise, it won't get sunlight to its leaves and can't begin the process of photosynthesis. (Contrast that with an acorn, which stores enough energy that an oak can usually take more time to have a growth spurt.) That's why big openings such as this one offer tulip poplars their best chance at getting multiple trees established.

We've noticed a lot of tulip poplars pushing their way up in the opening this summer. We'll help them along by removing invasive species that try to grow in the opening. "They want to grow here," says Eric Bridges, Conservancy Director of Operations. "They're just competing with a lot of things--like privet and honeysuckle--that they historically didn't have to compete with."

We'll continue monitoring this section of trail and making minor interventions to help the tulip poplars along and combat invasives (which also love big sunny spots). Take a walk on the trail and see what interesting things you encounter!



The opening between markers 20 and 21 is especially large; here it's shown in January and in September. Top: a bumble bee visits jewelweed and releases pollen as it exits.

## Amanda Mauck-Skinner on supporting the park

Overton Park has been part of Amanda Mauck-Skinner's life for years--as a backdrop to her move from a small town to a big city, as a weekly destination with her dog, and as a place to safely see friends in a time of social distancing. Currently the Director of Web and Digital Strategy for Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare, she has been a Memphian for 20 years. Since 2015, she has supported Overton Park Conservancy with a monthly gift. We asked her why the park is one of her favorite places in Memphis.

### **How long have you been coming to the park? What are some of your favorite memories?**

I lived in the Park Terrace apartments in 2003 when I was in college, but my roommates and I didn't take advantage of the park the way we should have. I was from a small town and had heard scary things. We visited just a couple of times but we had a beautiful view. I loved sitting on our balcony and overlooking that green space.

I really started using the park when I lived on Hawthorne Street. I was training for the St. Jude half-marathon and starting at the park was always my favorite route. I didn't have a yard and didn't have a respite in my own space, so to be able to quiet down and walk was really so beneficial.

Once I got my dog Winston in 2014, we would go to the dog park every Saturday just to get his energy out. It became our park at that point. I would bring my blanket and lay on the Greensward and let Winston sun. It was during the time of the parking challenges, and I felt ownership with us being there and showing that we were there to enjoy the park the way it was.



Winston on the Greensward in 2014



Amanda and husband Jeremie Skinner; photo by Elizabeth Hoard Photography

And it was so beautiful that spring. Those weekends were my favorite days.

### **What does a typical visit to the park look like for you?**

We go to the dog park a lot. Winston and our other dog Maggie make friends easily. Winston prefers people to the other dogs, but Maggie thinks she's a big dog and loves to run and play and chase. Living so close, my husband and I find ourselves at the park for various reasons, like meeting friends on the Greensward. We can't wait for Levitt Shell concerts to return.

### **Why did you choose a monthly gift?**

It's easier financially. I don't have to think about it and I know that I have a steady contribution.

### **Are there other local organizations you support?**

I also support Vollintine-Evergreen Greenline as a monthly donor, and Le Bonheur. I think the thing that ties them all together is that those organizations provide an essential service to the community.

### **Why is it important to financially support the park?**

I give to Overton Park in particular because it is such a central part of being part of Midtown. For so many people, being able to play in your yard like you can in the country or suburbs is not their reality, so the park providing a safe place for kids to play is really essential to a good, well-rounded community. I love going to the park and seeing all different types and groups of people enjoying themselves and enjoying each other. There's nothing better than seeing kids from all walks of life becoming best friends on the playground. That's what parks are supposed to be.

## Remembering Jim Gilliland

When James S. “Jim” Gilliland passed away in February, Overton Park lost a daily presence. Since returning to his hometown in 2000 after serving as General Counsel of the United States Department of Agriculture, Jim and his wife Lucia walked in the park together nearly every day.

Jim and Lucia’s 56-year marriage took them around the world, including their stint in Washington, DC as part of the Clinton administration. They began a habit of regular hiking in Rock Creek Park that they carried through their travels and eventually back to Memphis. Living less than a mile from Overton Park made the park feel like an extension of their home.

Lucia has served on Overton Park Conservancy’s board of directors since its inception. She recalls that even in the years before the Conservancy began caring for the forest, she and Jim recognized its value. “We realized even then that having a forest in the middle of the city was so amazing and wonderful.



Partly because we’d lived and traveled in a number of places, we could see the lengths other cities were going to just to create any green space. The Old Forest is something that Memphis is particularly blessed with.”

As an attorney, Jim was keenly aware of the landmark 1971 Supreme Court case that spared Overton Park from being bisected by Interstate 40. “Without the citizens who banded together to save Overton Park, we might not even have a park here today,” Lucia says.

Jim and Lucia’s life together was devoted to service, whether through political involvement or community volunteer work. So when choosing where to direct any gifts that might be made in his memory, Lucia says “there was absolutely no other choice for Jim” than the Conservancy. “He recognized the unique treasure Memphis has in the park and had a desire to make it better and keep it sacrosanct forever.” Thanks to the outpouring of support in his honor, Overton Park will continue to feel his impact well into the future.

### Overton Park Conservancy gratefully acknowledges all who made gifts in memory of Jim Gilliland.

Donna & Warren Adams  
Inez & George Adams  
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Natalie & Jimmy Jalenak  
Peggy & L.R. Jalenak, Jr.

# Intentional planning for the park's future

*Let's talk about intentionality.*

Embarking on Overton Park's first comprehensive planning effort in more than 30 years, we are in the process of examining our approach to improving and managing the park. That means we must ask ourselves what our collective priorities should be when making decisions about the future. We may then set a course that is intentional, and reflects back those community priorities.

We know the Overton Park plan must focus on the people who will use the park, and the plan must ensure that everyone feels a sense of belonging and ownership. That means we must be very intentional about including all voices in the planning effort, especially those voices the Conservancy may not hear from as often. For example, we know that young people (teens) are less likely to show up for the traditional kinds of public meetings one might host as part of a planning effort. To ensure those voices are included in our plan, we partnered with the Center for Transforming Communities for a deep dive into what Memphis youth need from their park. We also know that our surveys about the park tend to yield responses from predominantly white stakeholders, and we must do more to engage the park's broadly diverse demographics. Our job now is to listen, deeply and intentionally, to understand how Overton Park may continue to be a place of belonging, of refuge, of community.

Our planning effort is people-centric and future-focused, but also allows us some reflection on the park's history as a place of community, and a place that drives civic engagement and activism. We honor those who intentionally set about desegregating Overton Park and all public spaces in Memphis (who prevailed in the *Watson v. City of Memphis* case, 1963); those who protected the park from I-40 expansion (*Citizens to Preserve Overton Park v. Volpe*, 1971); and those of you who understand that the park's future cannot be left to chance, and must be intentionally supported.

Now is the time to get involved. Please make sure you respond to our survey. Follow the planning effort closely and share your own ideas with us. Help us do the work of protecting and maintaining this special place by making a financial contribution, and invite those in your circle to also join us as we plan for Overton Park's bright future.

tina's  
message

*Tina Sullivan*

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Libby & Jim Witherington  
Kent Wunderlich

## Support Overton Park with your holiday shopping

We're excited to announce that for the first time, Overton Park Conservancy will have an online store! We're partnering with our friends at Bluff City Sports to bring you an easy way to stock up on park gear.

Items on offer will include logo merchandise such as baseball caps, tote bags, running shirts, and (at last!) an Overton Park hoodie. We'll also be making some of our favorite classic t-shirt designs available, including the 2015 Taropop illustration depicting the attractions of Overton Park framed as a tree.

When the store launches in the coming weeks, you can find it at [overtonpark.org/shop](http://overtonpark.org/shop). Portions of each purchase will benefit Overton Park Conservancy.

There's still time to purchase your Overton Park notecards! Inspired by our regular #NatureZen email feature, these cards bring together five of our favorite images of Old Forest wildlife. They make wonderful holiday gifts!

Cards are \$20 per set of ten and will be mailed to you in early December. You can place your order at [overtonpark.org/notecards](http://overtonpark.org/notecards).



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