

A NEW PLAYGROUND FOR WASHINGTON PARK

Albany, New York | 2022

Concept Design



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Washington Park Playground project was spearheaded in 2020 by the Washington Park Conservancy (WPC) in partnership with the City of Albany, with design services provided by Trowbridge, Wolf & Michaels Landscape Architects (TWMLA) and Rusty Keeler of Earthplay. This report is made possible with the generous support from the City of Albany, Albany County, New York State Assemblywoman Patricia Fahy, and many individual contributors.

The playground rebuild project is a collaborative effort involving many organizations and individuals from across the City of Albany. The project team extends gratitude and appreciation to the many individuals who volunteered their time, dedication, and expertise.

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

From tulips in the spring to leaf peeping in the fall, Washington Park is one of the premier outdoor attractions in the City of Albany. This beloved gem of the city's park system serves not just Albany residents, but visitors who come from far and wide to enjoy this historic park. For families with children, the Washington Park playground, located on the northern edge of the park, is particularly popular. However, the existing playground has not been updated in decades and no longer adequately serves the needs of a bustling park in the heart of downtown Albany.

To address this growing need, the Washington Park Conservancy (WPC), in partnership with the City of Albany, is leading the initiative to reimagine a new playground for Albany's historic Washington Park that will serve its diverse users. WPC's vision is to design and build a new playground that offers opportunities for children of all abilities and means to enjoy the benefits of inclusive play in an accessible, engaging, and safe environment. Consistent with its mission to preserve, protect, and promote Washington Park, WPC seeks to reimagine and repurpose the existing playground area with equipment, structures, and features that speak to the history and natural landscape of the park, while introducing a unique play opportunity to the area.

To spearhead the effort to reimagine a brand new playground for Washington Park, WPC convened a volunteer Playground Committee comprised of individuals representing local neighborhood associations and community-based organizations located in the Albany area who use and visit Washington Park. WPC also engaged



Trowbridge, Wolf & Michaels Landscape Architects (TWMLA), a Fisher Associates Landscape Architecture studio, and Rusty Keeler of Earthplay— both based in Ithaca, NY— to guide and provide their expertise in the development of a conceptual playground design.

The committee and project team determined that a new playground in Washington Park will need to accomplish the following goals:

- Be both a destination playground for visitors and an engaging playscape and gathering space for Albany residents;
- Offer fun, challenging, unique, and accessible play opportunities to children of all abilities and means;
- Honor the park's historic landscape design and reduce environmental impacts;

- Include unique play structures and equipment that are not available in other city parks and playground;
- Provide opportunities for multi-generational users;
- Offer truly accessible and engaging play opportunities for children, families, and individuals of all abilities; and
- Serve as a gateway to the larger Washington Park and inspire visitors to become stewards of the park.

Project Scope

The project team and steering committee facilitated a comprehensive and creative community engagement strategy to ensure an inclusive and transparent planning process. The goals for concept design process were to:

1. **Engage and hear from our community** about their ideas and concerns,
2. **Assess existing conditions** and understand existing constraints, and
3. **Develop a conceptual vision** to guide the future development of the new Washington Park Playground.

The following contents of this plan present the community's collective vision and priorities for the new playground; a detailed analysis of the site's existing conditions, opportunities, and constraints; and a conceptual vision for Washington Park's future playground that will guide future design and build-out.

What is a Concept Design Plan?

This concept design plan is the first step in the playground planning process. The goal of a concept plan is to identify the high-level ideas, parameters, opportunities, and constraints for a future site design. A concept design is heavily informed by community and stakeholder input, as well as detailed analysis of the site's existing conditions and surrounding context. This plan **articulates the design direction, future programming of the site, and the needs and desires of park visitors, playground users, and the surrounding neighborhood's residents**. Location-specific designs, equipment, and materials that are consistent with this vision will be considered during the next phase of the planning process.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Site Overview

The five-acre proposed playground site is located in the northeast corner of Washington Park along Washington Park Road. The site is served by pedestrian and vehicular entrances along Washington Park Road as it intersects with State Street. The existing playground area includes a hilly grass lawn that is vegetated with mature trees, with pockets of playground equipment and structures scattered throughout the site. The current equipment is composed of pieces from several generations of playground designs. Much of these are now considered outdated, inadequate, and unsafe in some cases, and are not accessible or developmentally appropriate in others. The nearest restroom facility is located more than 600 feet away from the playground site at the Washington Park Lake House.





Existing Conditions — Select Features





SITE INVENTORY & ANALYSIS



Existing Issues and Concerns

- There are no accessible routes into the playground from State Street or Washington Park Road
- Entry and egress thresholds are not clearly defined
- Site lighting is currently in place around the perimeter
- Play zones are not currently differentiated
- There are no accessible routes into the playground
- Some of the play equipment is in a state of disrepair
- Physical distance between play zones is considered vast by users
- Observation and supervision from one play area to another is difficult
- Play areas are not physically or developmentally contained
- User groups are not clearly defined
- Primary and secondary circulation systems are not clearly defined
- Proximity to Washington Park Road causes concern for parents and guardians
- Distinct lack of amenities for parents and caregivers
- Lack of shade is an issue in the summer.

Opportunities

- Expansive and beautiful viewsheds offer users the feeling of being surrounded by nature
- Mature vegetation is largely in good condition
- The playground can use the existing paved road to the east as a primary pedestrian circulation route
- Topography
- Location- pros w/in context of the park

A professional site survey and tree inventory were completed in 2021 for the site and its relevant context. Preserving the existing trees through critical root zone protection is a major factor in determining the locations for potential play zones. The survey and topographic analysis are located in the Appendix.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A primary goal of this process was to engage the local community and collect input from a broad spectrum of park users to inform the playground concept design. The project team reached out to and heard from youth (including teenagers), residents with and without children, park lovers, youth program staff, community organizations, fitness enthusiasts, and people who live outside the city but travel here to enjoy Albany's historic park.

WPC, the Playground Steering Committee, and the project consultants were committed to a comprehensive community engagement strategy to ensure an inclusive and transparent planning process. To this end, the Committee identified the following priorities that guided decision-making and activities:

- Engaging the diverse current users of the park in our concept design planning, with focused attention on **equity issues and inclusivity** across socioeconomic, cultural, racial, and geographic groups within the city of Albany.
- Managing a **flexible timeline** to accommodate changing health guidelines due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Consideration of the varying levels of **access to digital platforms** and possible alternatives to address the “digital divide” in our community
- Establishing **partnerships with stakeholder organizations** early in the design process, including but not limited to: Albany Public Library, Albany City School District, Boys & Girls Club, Girls, Inc., PAL, YMCA, Radix Center, Youth FX, South End Children's Cafe, and more.

- **Engaging youth in the design process**, through activities in schools, after-school programs, recreation programs, and the public library. TWMLA will generate materials that educate on a broad range of playscapes and engage children and young adults in the planning process.
- **Development of a project website** that houses engaging visuals, a survey, and other opportunities for community feedback, with the opportunity for translation for language access.



Process

The project team developed a multi-pronged community engagement and outreach strategy to engage a large and diverse sample of the community. The project team worked with the Steering Committee, WPC Board of Directors, and the City of Albany to develop an outreach strategy to engage residents and stakeholders across the city.

Outreach methods included online and printed surveys for adults and youth (see Appendices A-D), community meetings, on-site workshops, collaboration with schools and after-school community programs, and outreach to community-based organizations and institutions. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, planned outreach efforts were modified as needed to adapt to virtual environments, and our timeline extended to allow for more comprehensive public engagement. The project team relied on community partners to distribute and disseminate information about the project and ways to offer ideas and feedback.

The success of our engagement process is credited to the many individuals and organizations who promoted the project and promoted the community feedback opportunities. We worked closely with schools, youth organizations, and community institutions. The Albany Public Library offered their a drop-off location for completed survey at the majority of their city branches. Throughout the process, we also maintained close alignment and coordination with the City's Recreation Department, Department of General Services, and Albany Police Department.



WASHINGTON PARK PLAYGROUND YOUTH SURVEY

ACTIVITY #1: PLEASE CIRCLE YOUR FIVE (5) FAVORITE OUTDOOR PLAY ACTIVITIES

	RUNNING		PLAYING WITH MUD AND PEBBLES		PRETENDING
	JUMPING		BUILDING		PLAY WITH FRIENDS
	SWINGING		DIGGING		PLAYING WITH NATURE
	CLIMBING		HIDING		PLAYING & LISTENING TO MUSIC
	BALL PLAY		SAND PLAY		READING
	WHEELS (BIKES, KICK/SCOOTERS)		WATER PLAY		RESTING

WASHINGTON PARK PLAYGROUND YOUTH SURVEY

ACTIVITY #2:
WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU PLAY OUTSIDE?
(Draw, write, or paste in the space below.)

PLEASE DRAW, DESCRIBE OR PASTE YOUR DREAM PLAYGROUND

I want to play on the swing and the slide on the mud pit. I am going to swing and slide off in to my mud pit.

Youth survey workbook. A four-page workbook that asked children from pre-kindergarten through grade six to reflect on their favorite outdoor play activities and what their dream playground would look like and include. The survey workbook was distributed to local schools and youth organizations. The youth survey workbook was accompanied by a Facilitator's Guide, which included an overview of the types of play activities children engage in outside and prompts for creative classroom discussion.

Online surveys (youth and adult). Two online surveys were developed to capture a broader audience and provide an opportunity for feedback from both youth and adults. The survey used skip logic based on age to determine appropriate questions.

Direct engagement of park and playground users. Steering Committee members administered paper versions of the surveys to playground visitors during peak hours. Temporary signage was posted in the existing playground area and at park events to promote greater awareness of the project and community survey. Additional surveys were distributed and collected at events and programs in the park during summer and fall 2021.

Multilingual translation. The online surveys were translated into Spanish to reach more community members. The Spanish translations were generously provided by Cairo Durham High School students in a Spanish Language class taught by Lorraine Miner. The class also provided Spanish translation for signage publicizing the survey. Additional signage announcing the project and survey was translated into Arabic, which was generously provided by Masjid As-Salam.



Outreach Summary

Over the course of 18 months, the project team engaged more than 1000 residents through online and paper surveys for youth and adults, emails, phone calls, direct messages, a Facebook page, Mailchimp, and an in-person event in the park in September 2021. In May & early June 2021, the project team received more than 550 online surveys completed by youth and adults, and 230 paper surveys in which youth shared their favorite types of play and their creativity in drawings and descriptions of dream playgrounds.

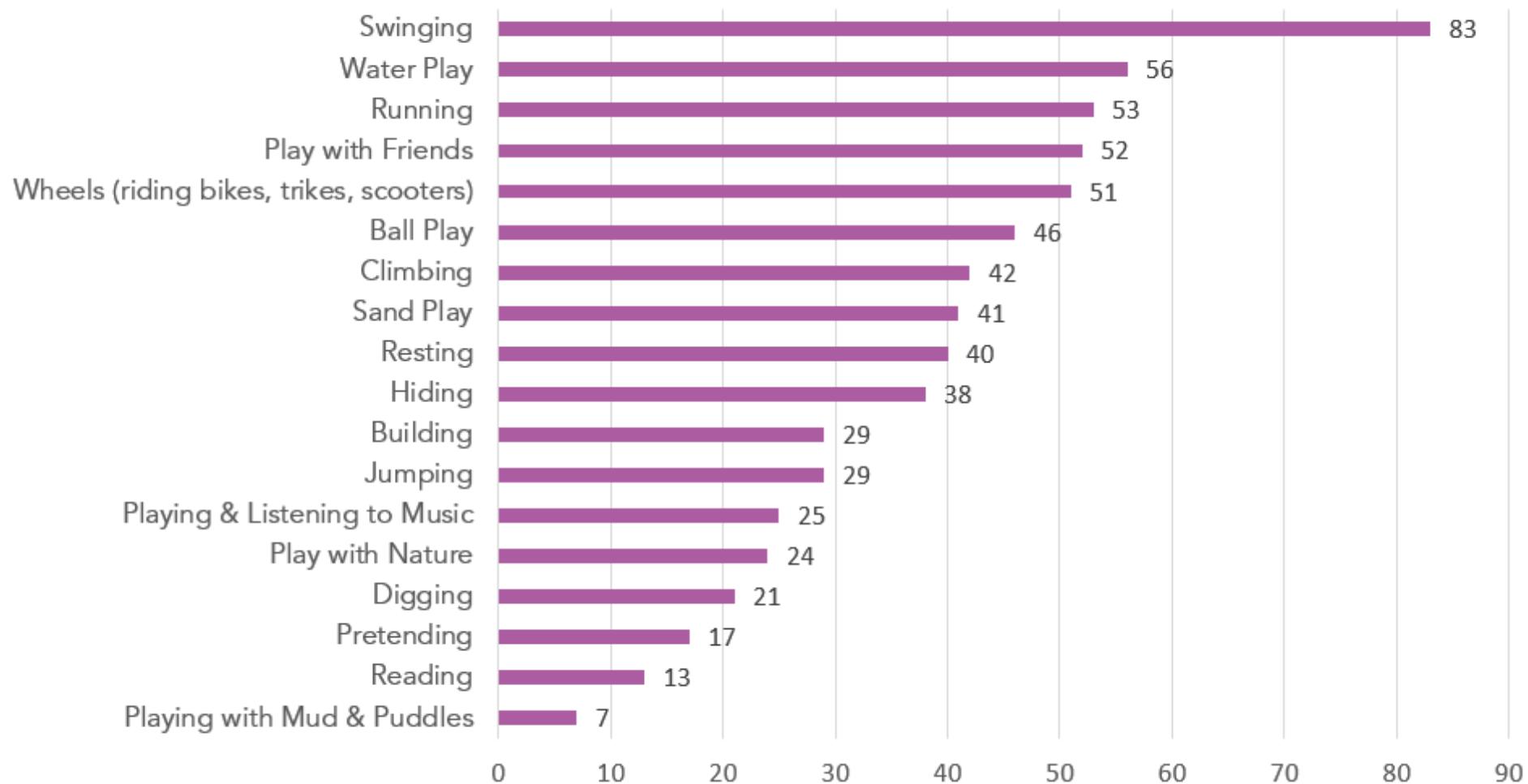
We received completed surveys from children across the city of Albany with the help of the following schools and organizations:

Boys & Girls Club of the Greater Capital Area (youth after -school & teen program at the Clubhouse)
RISSE (Refugee & Immigrant Support Services of Emmaus, Inc.)
Albany Public Library
South End Night Market
City School District of Albany
The RED Bookshelf
The Baby Institute
Masjid As-Salam
In Our Own Voices
South End Children's Cafe
Trinity Nursery School & Daycare
Grand Street Community Arts
Sheridan Preparatory Academy (SPA)
New Scotland Elementary School (NSES)
Arbor Hill Elementary School
Eagle Point Elementary
Thomas O'Brien Academy of Science and Technology (TOAST)
Giffen Elementary
Delaware Community School (DCS)
Albany School of Humanities (ASH)
Philip J. Schuyler Achievement Academy
Myers Middle School
Hackett Middle School
Castle Island Montessori
Homeschool students

Summary of Youth Responses

We heard from more than 300 children ages 5 through 13 throughout the city of Albany about what they would like to see in a new playground at Washington Park.

What do you like to do when you play outside?



Please draw, describe, or paste your dream playground!

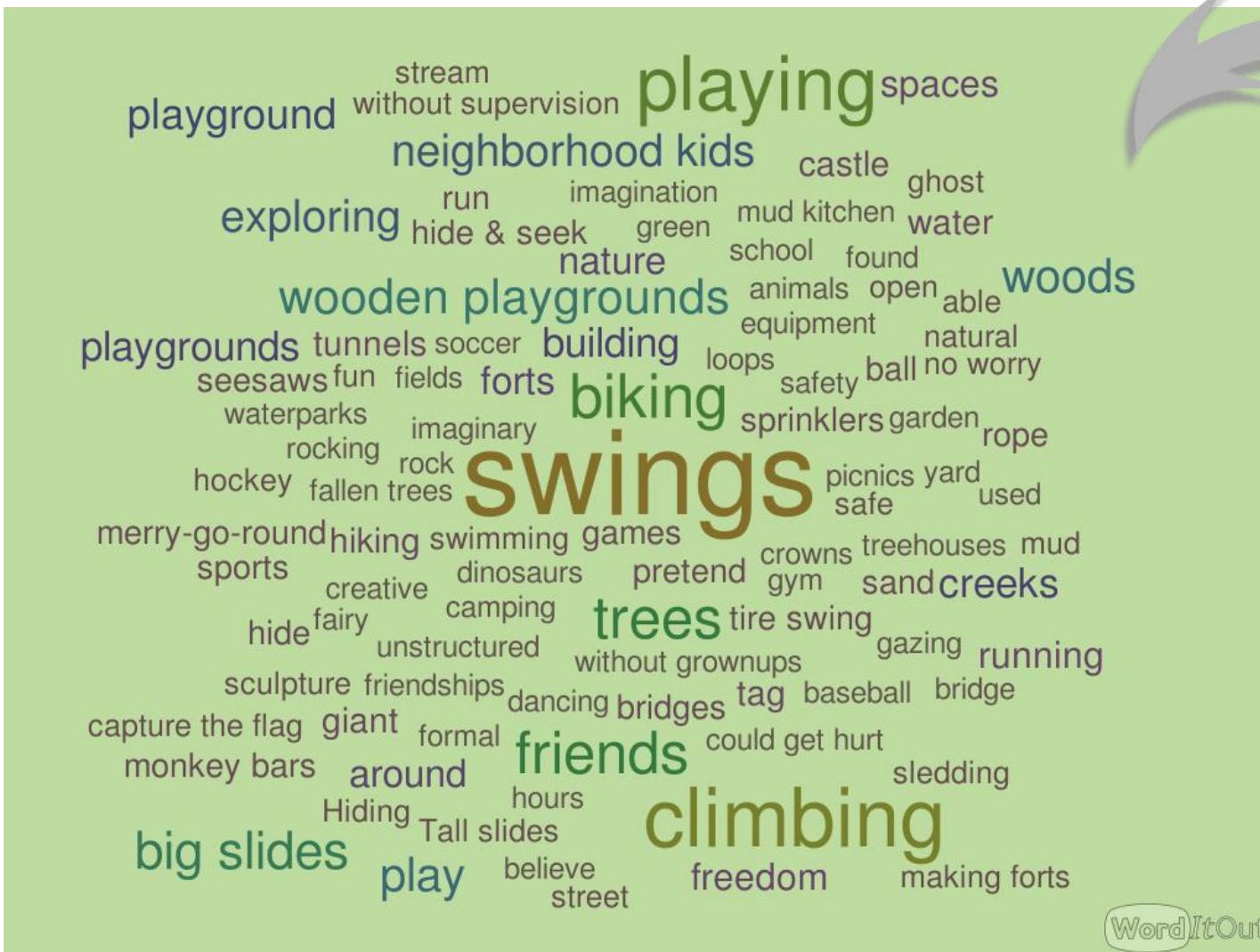


We learned that youth want swings (LOTS of swings, tall ones so they feel like they're "flying"), structures high to climb ("high enough to watch out for Zombies"), slides (water slides, slides into mud puddles), and the opportunities to explore, rest in quiet, and play with water (sand and mud). Many students asked for things we wish we could include — such as a chocolate fountain, jacuzzi, race track, animals — and others for more attainable things — "I want to play in the mud because I want to make mud pies," or "I want a track around the playground to ride my bike." An older student expressed a desire for "parkour, challenge myself, adventurous, not standard, climbing, tricky obstacle courses."

Summary of Adult Responses

We heard from more than 500 teenagers and adults ages 16 years and older throughout the city of Albany about what they would like to see in a new playground at Washington Park.

What are your best childhood memories of playing outside?



Teenagers and adults were asked to reflect on their fondest childhood memories of playing outside and the types of activities they enjoyed.



If members of your household seldom or do not visit Washington Park Playground, what are the reasons?

- Lack of facilities (e.g. bathrooms, drinking fountains)
- Prefer other area playgrounds
- Need transportation to get there
- Lack of accessible and age-appropriate equipment
- Don't feel safe
- Don't have park features we are interested in
- Needs more seating
- Lack of shade
- Too spread out/ lack of enclosure

What would you like to see in a new playground?

- Enclosed play areas
- More consolidation of the playground area and equipment
- Traffic control
- Accessible entrances
- Natural play areas (e.g. boulders, logs, plants)
- Traditional playground equipment (swings, slides)
- Sensory materials (e.g. sand, water)
- Adaptive equipment
- Picnic tables and seating
- Spaces for teens to socialize
- Shade

WPC held a public meeting on September 18, 2021 in the park to learn about the playground project, provide feedback on preliminary designs, and share their ideas and concerns. A summary of the event is located in the Appendix.

PLAYGROUND CONCEPT DESIGN

Desired Activities and Play Zones

Based on the survey results and public meeting feedback, the following activity and play zone categories were identified. These topics defined the high-level themes for activities, spaces, and programs within the new playground.

- Swing, spin & climb zone
- Tot spot (baby & toddler appropriate play area)
- Tot tops (baby & toddler slides)
- The Patio (gathering and programming space)
- The Meadow (historic feature & unprogrammed)
- Story Tree (central gathering & programming space)
- The Creek (water play)
- The Hill (slides & climbing)
- Parkour Zone
- Swingsville (for all ages & abilities)
- Picnic Plateau
- Music Circle (formalized space)
- Fitness Zone (for older children, teens & adults)
- Older Kid Climb & Adventure Zone

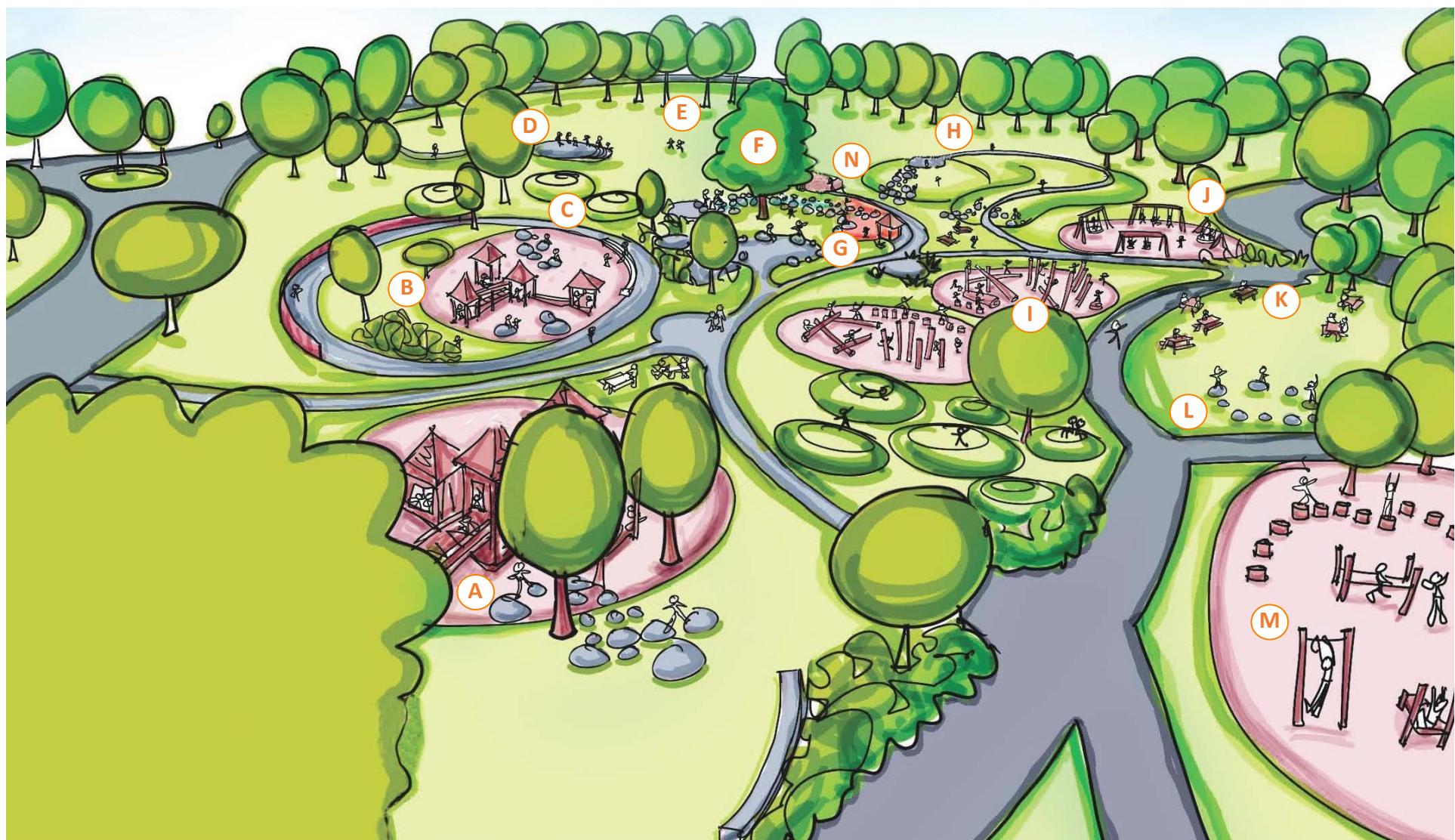
Functional Necessities

Based on the analysis of existing conditions, access, circulation, and feedback of functional necessities, the following diagram provides an analysis of major proposed entrance thresholds and circulation within and surrounding the playground area. Functional necessities for the playground include:

- Reinforced and well-defined primary and secondary entry thresholds
- A safety buffer from Washington Park Road
- Defined gathering spaces
- Better opportunities for observation of multiple children
- Clear hierarchy of paths (primary and secondary)
- Universally accessible paths, equipment, and amenities
- Safe parking and pedestrian road crossings
- Defined user group zones
- Preservation of existing trees & balanced ecology
- Work with existing topography



Rendering —Aerial View, Looking South



A Swing, Spin & Climb Zone
B Tot Spot
C Tot Tops
D The Patio

E The Meadow
F Story Tree
G The Creek
H The Hill

I Parkour
J Swingsville
K Picnic Plateau
L Music Circle

M Fitness Zone
N Older Kid Climb & Adventure

Rendering —Aerial View, Looking North



Accessibility

This diagram shows the intended levels of accessibility throughout the new playground. The pathways and play areas in **blue** indicate those that will encompass **Universal Design**—design standards intended to create an inclusive and welcoming environment and experience for all people of varying abilities. From a site design perspective, this means that the design will include ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) standards for accessible design in addition to other elements beyond technical requirements. **ADA accessible areas**, indicated in **green**, will meet ADA design standards to allow for children and visitors of all physical abilities to enjoy.

