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# Your first look at Oak Cliff's I-35E deck park master plan and why this project is a national model

Southern Gateway greenspace will symbolically mend the Dallas neighborhoods that were split and destroyed by highway construction more than 60 years ago.



This rendering of Phase One of the Southern Gateway deck park in Dallas shows the multi-leveling of the space that reflects the topography of Oak Cliff. Also shown is the children's play area, above the northbound I-35E service road, the stage pavilion is at upper right, the multi-purpose building at upper left and the pedestrian bridge that leads to that building. (HMK Architects/SWA Group)



By Sharon Grigsby  
8:54 AM on Jul 13, 2021



Today I bring you the first look at the master plan for the Southern Gateway deck park, a greenspace that will echo Oak Cliff's limestone escarpment and lush tree canopy as it unfurls over I-35E adjacent to the Dallas Zoo.

The just-released designs and renderings for this park between Ewing and Marsalis avenues play on our city's lopsided topography: Nearly all of Dallas' rolling hills, deep-running creeks and crusty cliffs and ridges are in the southern half. North of I-30 and the Trinity River, it's nothing much but flat, flat, flat -- all the way to Oklahoma.

"The community wants to celebrate Oak Cliff as this escarpment overlooking the North Texas prairie," HKS architect Yavar Saremi said. "A lot of parts of the park are elevated to create that same multilevel experience."

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SWA Group landscape architect Chuck McDaniel, who lives in Oak Cliff, said, "We repeatedly heard, 'be authentic to the place and to the diverse group of people who live in this community.'"

The new park's symbolic mending back together of Oak Cliff -- neighborhoods blasted apart in the late 1950s by the interstate's construction -- is also exactly the model the rest of the country needs to see amid Washington's discussion of infrastructure needs.

Mayor Eric Johnson, raised in West Dallas and Oak Cliff and now the leader of a city still with too many opportunity gaps, told me the park fits perfectly into President Joe Biden's call for improving public infrastructure in order to correct injustices in neglected communities.



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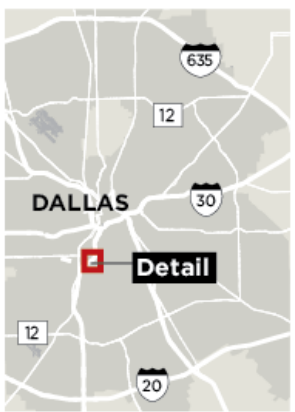
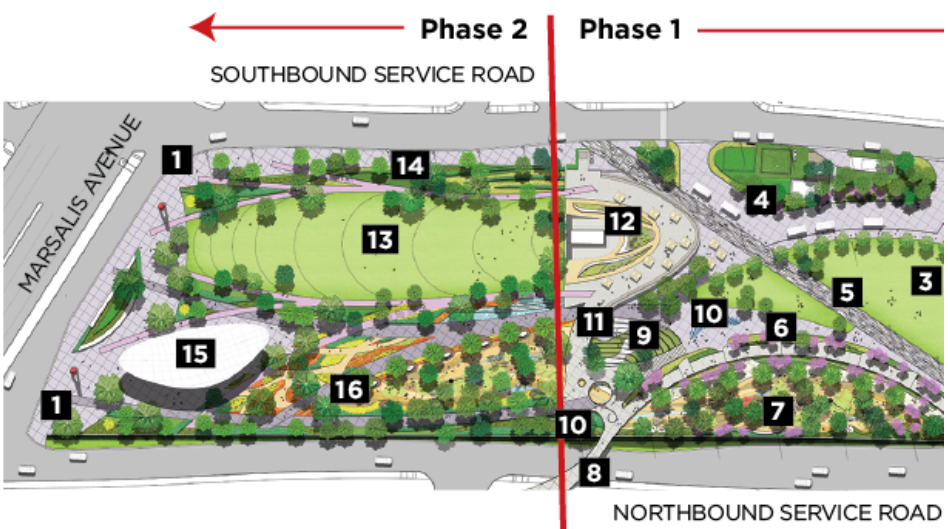
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“This project is exactly within that scope,” Johnson said Monday. “We’re not just doing the bare minimum to connect those communities from a civil engineering standpoint but to do things within the park to drive that equity piece.”

**Southern Gateway Park master plan**



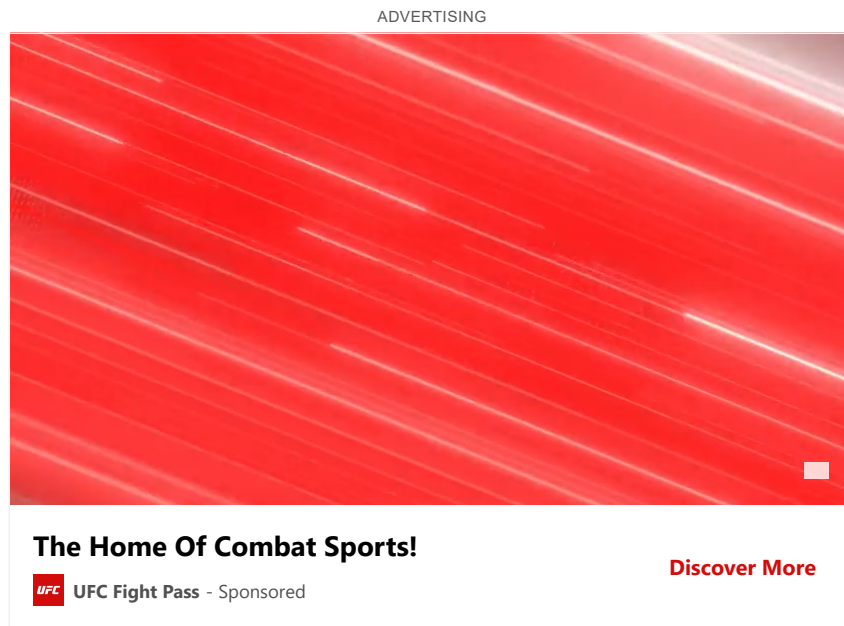
**PARK FEATURES**

- 1. Iconic element
- 2. Stage pavilion
- 3. Lawn
- 4. Park Drive
- 5. 12th Street Promenade
- 6. Escarpment feature
- 7. Playground
- 8. Pedestrian bridge

SOURCE: Southern Gateway Park Master Plan And Design Renderings

Equity is as critical to the foundation of this park as is the concrete being poured, said April Allen, president of the Southern Gateway Public Green Foundation. The greenspace will be both a gateway into southern Dallas and “a gateway for the beginnings of more opportunities for the neighborhoods,” she told me.

The park design is all about restoring a portion of the destroyed neighborhood and giving it back to the community. That starts with a new canopy of more than 250 trees and other native plants, especially those that will entice local birds and butterflies.



The neighborhood’s severed connection will be re-established through the 12th Street Promenade, a pedestrian pathway that runs from one side of the park to the other and is lined with interactive information about noteworthy past and present Oak Cliff residents.

Phase One of this public-private partnership features expansive lawns and the many programming elements that neighbors said were most important: a stage and pavilion, a children’s playground and interactive water features, outdoor classroom space for schools and organizations, a multipurpose building, integrated exhibits in the terraced “history stairs” and a dedicated food truck area.

The park will join together two communities that have developed independently of one another for 60 years. On one side is the Tenth Street Historic District, among the last intact freedmen’s towns in the country, and other long-thriving neighborhoods. On the other side is the bustling Latino community exemplified by the bustling vibe on Jefferson Boulevard.

“We’ll pay homage to the diverse cultures so they feel they belong here and take ownership,” Saremi said. It’s a back-to-nature park, but also one of vibrant colors inspired by textile designs from various traditions.



This rendering of Phase One of the Southern Gateway deck park in Dallas shows the multi-purpose building, the 12th Street Promenade, running from the bottom left of the rendering toward the multipurpose building, and the terraced seating area. (HMK Architects/SWA Group)

The children’s playground is a great example of the commitment by HKS and SWA to be authentically Oak Cliff. McDaniel described it as “a playhouse in the woods,” with equipment built of natural materials and a floor inlaid with giant leaves and identifying information.

The state Transportation Department had just begun building the park’s deck structure when **I wrote last July about the project.** That work is now 50% complete.

Construction of the actual park will begin in fall 2022 with the opening of Phase One in 2023. Phase Two’s timeline depends on first securing infrastructure funding.

Allen, an Oak Cliff resident, told me that everything about the design furthers what makes this “park with a purpose” unique -- both in topography and in uses.

For instance, a 9,000-square-foot flexible-use building will include space for Oak Cliff entrepreneurs to do business. The area designated for food trucks can double as a staging spot for mobile health clinic vans.

While the design and renderings are new to most of us, neighbors of the park have already seen the plans, part of the consistent community engagement that has underpinned the work.

“We have waited so long for a major project like this that could perhaps also spur some economic development, housing improvements -- it’s all overdue,” said Lester Houston, president of the 3,500-home Zoo Creek Park Neighborhood Association.



Oak Cliff residents April Allen, president of the Southern Gateway Public Green Foundation, and foundation board member Lester Houston, who is also president of the Zoo Creek Park Neighborhood Association, at Lester's home. (Lynda M. González / Staff Photographer)

“That highway was such a tragic thing because it divided these neighborhoods,” he said during our interview at his family’s longtime home. “But now we’ve got a park that’s going to stitch all that back together again.”

Houston, among the Southern Gateway foundation’s first board members, gets calls weekly about the park, many of them from residents who remember when the city abruptly took the neighborhood’s Thomas Hill Park for a zoo expansion more than 30 years ago.

He relishes getting to respond with a hearty “yes” when those fellow residents ask, “Are you telling me that we’re going to have a place we can walk to?”

In 1960, Houston, then only 4 years old, moved with his family to east Oak Cliff from the State-Thomas neighborhood, now known as Uptown.

He moved away after graduating from Roosevelt High School, first serving in the U.S. Marines then devoting his career to social work and community organizing.

Over 40 years, he lived in some of the nation’s top cities -- New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta and DC. But his heart always yearned for “the topography, the uniqueness of Oak Cliff” and eventually the family home, on two acres of wooded land, tugged him back to Dallas six years ago.

“I could move anywhere I wanted to, but I am so glad that I made the decision to come back,” he said. “There is a lot of pride in Oak Cliff. That was something I didn’t always realize.”

Houston first heard about the deck park during a meeting at the Oak Cliff Chamber and subsequently spoke to the City Council about his desire to see the greenspace become reality.

That caught the attention of one of Oak Cliff's council members at the time, Scott Griggs, and Houston soon got a call asking if he'd like to join the board that was just forming.

Houston loves the park's design, which he believes is "genuine Oak Cliff," and he credits the architects with taking a "bottom-up approach that involved people early in the game."

He believes the community involvement has eased early concerns -- that the park would bring gentrification with it or that funders wouldn't support a project south of I-30.

"People are looking for progress in their neighborhoods, especially people who have lived here for decades," he said. "And they think this park will give that for a change."

Houston said he even had to confess to something that his younger self would never have believed possible: "I'm so proud of Dallas. Dallas is actually changing, I'm seeing progress."



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[Sharon Grigsby](#). I'm the Metro columnist, which means that if it's happening in North Texas, I'm likely to write about it. My work on Baylor's sexual assault scandal earned a spot as a 2018 Pulitzer finalist. I was born in Waco, raised my own family in the suburbs and have been back in Dallas ever since.

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