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Jeannette Rankin Peace Park Design / Restoration Narrative

SITE CONTEXT -

Jeannette Rankin Park (JRP) is a Montana Department of Transportation Right of Way (ROW) located immediately south of Madison Street Bridge surrounded by 5th Street / Madison Street / Arthur Street. JRP started out as a 1.3 acre triangular parcel that was left over from the construction of Madison Street Bridge in 1960; appropriately named 'Madison Street Park'. In 1972, the park was named 'Memorial Park' and in 1980 it was renamed Jeannette Rankin Park to honor a Montana native who was the first woman to serve in US congress. Unfortunately, Jeannette Rankin Park has suffered extensive damage to its landscape from a 2012 street enhancement project to enhance traffic flow and pedestrian safety. This project has provided an opportunity to rethink the park itself – What it actually is or might yet become as both an idea and physical reality.

CURRENT CONDITION –

JRP currently operates as a: Public Park/Memorial to Jeannette Rankin, a natural threshold to the University of Montana, and an entrance to the University Neighborhood. Unfortunately, the street enhancement project further increased maintenance problems for JRP by constructing steep slopes on the eastern park edge which cannot be mowed by City equipment. The once vibrant memorial fountain has fallen into disrepair due to vandalism, decay and high operating cost leaving a small and yet important plaque honoring Jeannette Rankin's accomplishments. A fountain that was once surround by a continuous circle of lush evergreens that created a cool summer escape, no longer meets the intended goals of honoring Jeannette Rankin. The north half of the irrigation system has failed and much of the park is dominated by weeds. The existing turf is of poor quality as well. However, positive park impacts have occurred due to the street enhancement project. There is a new well on site, improved street lights and a strong community awareness to restore the park with partial funding & partnerships in place.

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GOALS + OBJECTIVES –

Restore JRP as a Memorial to Jeannette Rankin and create a more defined UM Gateway with an emphasis on xeriscape design practices, sometimes referred to as ‘drought tolerant’ landscapes. Aurora Water Conservation, leaders in the practice of xeriscapes in Aurora, Colorado municipalities defines xeriscapes as *‘A sustainable and drought-tolerant landscape that uses native or climate adapted low-water plants and specific techniques to maximize water efficiency’*. JRP as a xeriscape is both an idea and achievable physical reality. The anticipated level of service for phase I is level 4 transitioning to level 6 with the full build out of the master plan.

The Design Team believes that this type of landscape typology will be successful, beautiful and a financial benefit to the management costs of JRP. With the Missoula Water Wise Garden and The Payne Family Native American Center on the University of Montana Campus as ‘drought tolerant’ landscapes. JRP provides a unique and highly visible opportunity to implement City Goals of sustainability and ‘drought tolerant’ landscapes in public parks.

Missoula Parks & Recreation in cooperation with a committee of interested individuals from the UM and the Neighborhood Committee has developed a comprehensive master plan divided into three phases for Jeannette Rankin Park. The purpose of our presentation to the Park Board is to gain adoption of all three phases (comprehensive master plan), pending Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) concurrence on phases II and III. The project has gained approval from MDT for phase I. Park construction will be led by professional park staff, in partnership with potential volunteers and local organizations.

Phase I:

Jeannette Rankin Memorial & Park Restoration, Phase I, is creating the foundation for a beautiful, seasonally changing, organic 1.3 acre ‘drought tolerant’ landscape through the use of regionally appropriate and native plants that perform well with little or no irrigation, as well as turf reduction. Phase I will also set the stage for JRP to operate as a welcoming threshold to the University Campus & Neighborhood while focusing on the celebration of Jeannette Rankin.

To achieve year round plant interest in color and texture, the plant palette will utilize native and “regionally appropriate” plants, meaning, plants that may not be native to the area but are known to perform well under the site’s microclimate conditions. Because the natural environment constantly changes, no two visits will be alike to this 1.3 acre urban oasis.

The current memorial/fountain will be removed and replaced with a 2,150 sq. ft. ‘drought tolerant’ sculpture garden that honors the late Jeannette Rankin. The memorial site, as currently designed is 19’ in diameter, constructed from twenty-four inch tall boulders with a recycled black kiln ground treatment or equal dependent upon availability. Quotes from Jeannette Rankin could be sandblasted into the stone as funding resources are available.

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A future Jeannette Rankin themed sculpture is planned to be sited within the 19' memorial circle. Sculptures would need to honor the theme of Jeannette Rankin's vision to empower people to build a socially just, non-violent and maintainable community in an abstract or concrete manner. An arbiter panel (TBD), conceptually led by the Jeannette Rankin Peace Center would have final approval on an appropriate sculpture. The public art component is a great opportunity to further enhance a relationship with the University of Montana Art / Sculpture Program to display pieces on a rotating schedule or commission a design competition for a permanent piece.

A more interesting site approach and east / west circulation path was a high priority to the Liaison Neighborhood Design Committee. A 325' Peace Path sited east/west wraps the sculpture garden to the north providing unique views and an opportunity to relax or gain intellectual and personal growth. Primary garden access is along the 170' Water Wise Garden Path sited north / south framing the memorial sculpture with an evergreen tree and two deciduous trees with the North Hills in the background. All paths will be ADA accessible and treated with compacted decomposed granite.

Visitors are provided two benches within the center of the sculpture garden; one with ADA accommodations and two ADA accessible benches along 5th Street under the existing shade trees. The existing Jeannette Rankin Memorial Plaque will be restored and relocated at the southern entrance to the sculpture garden. Depending on available funding, a xeriscape sign will be located adjacent to the water wise path to provide public education to the benefits and methods of transforming a water-loving landscape into a water-saving landscape.

XERICSCAPE IMPLEMENTATION –

Renovating portions of JRP into a 'drought tolerant' landscape will require:

- Removal of existing turf grass (27,000 sq. ft.) north of the east / west path –Turf will be replaced with a 'drought tolerant' dryland seed mix that will reduce mowing and irrigation cost. Turf south of the east / west path will remain (19,600 sf. ft.)
- Soil conditioning – This will include the removal of rocks from the soil, tilling to make the soil friable (loose), and addition of soil conditioners and nutrients, such as compost to create a soil environment that will support low-water-use plant species.
- The existing irrigation system will be utilized in the dryland grass meadow to establish vegetation and provide supplemental watering as needed. A new subterranean drip irrigation system will be installed in the planting beds. An efficient irrigation system will be necessary to get the plant material established in the first two years.
- Once plants have a deep and healthy root system, irrigation to the 'drought tolerant' portions of the park will be turned-off except during seasonally extreme weather in order to prevent plant dieback.

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- Plants and grasses were suggested that are both native to the area and “regionally appropriate”, meaning, plants that may not be native to the area but are known to perform well under the site’s microclimate conditions. Advantages of using recommended plants, is a landscape that celebrates the local environment & microclimate through character, color and texture. Plant species that are sustainable, ‘drought tolerant’ and that prioritize natives when possible will provide an opportunity for education and annual adoption by volunteers.

Phase II:

A Welcoming Knoll on the west side of the park adjacent to Arthur Avenue enhances JRP as a gateway to the University of Montana and Neighborhood. Located atop the knoll is an architecturally appropriate way finding / gateway sign enhanced by a diverse ‘drought tolerant’ plant pallet bringing year round interest of color and texture to a confluence of students, parents and other guests visiting the University and community.

Phase III:

The goal of Phase III is to transform the boulevard adjacent to 5th street from Kentucky Bluegrass Turf into a low water use planting plan of native grasses and “regionally appropriate” shade tolerant plant species. Paths through the landscape every 60’ will provide pedestrian access from the curb to side walk.

In conclusion, the master plan and design detail as noted provides the community an opportunity to better understand and celebrate sustainability, ‘drought tolerant’ vegetation and Jeannette Rankin as a memorial and public park.

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