Westside Riverway Park: Exploring History, Culture, and Environment in Pittsfield’s Westside Neighborhood

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ENVI 411: Environmental Planning
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Westside Riverway Park Team (from left to right): Sean Dory ’19, Tessa Kelly, Tanu Kumar, and Caroline Weinberg ‘19
I. Introduction

“Westside Riverway Park: Exploring History, Culture, and Environment in Pittsfield’s Westside Neighborhood” is a study of the culture and history surrounding the existing park network in Pittsfield’s Westside neighborhood. Additionally, this work synthesizes the community feedback that has been received about the new Westside Riverway Park. We have worked closely with the two designers of the new park, Tessa Kelly and Tanu Kumar, throughout the project and are incredibly grateful to them for all their help, guidance, and leadership along the way. This work situates the future park within the pre-existing cultural and historical network in the Westside, and will be used to inform decisions about future programming and design choices made in the park.

Project Goals:

The goals of this project are to conduct, synthesize, and streamline research about the cultural and environmental histories surrounding the West Branch of the Housatonic River and the parks in its vicinity in the Westside neighborhood. Parks are an important aspect of any neighborhood, and we have especially found this to be true in the Westside. Parks are essential places where people gather and hold events. Thus, in order to properly situate and understand the future of Westside Riverway Park, we must understand the context and history that it is being inserted into. In our research, we consult both people (community members, city planners, town historians, etc.) and written sources. Additionally, as we synthesize this research, we also hope to make recommendations for partnerships that can help fund and organize future programing in the park that relates to the river’s history and current ecological state.
II. Background

Pittsfield History:

The land that is now Pittsfield, MA originally belonged to the Mohican Indian Tribe. It is speculated that the tribe used this land largely as seasonal hunting grounds, considering original name of the land was “Pontoosuck” which is translated by some to mean “place of winter deer.” The land was settled by wealthy Bostonian Jacob Wendell in 1738. By 1761, there are estimated to have been about 200 residents, which grew to 2,000 by the 1780s. Pittsfield quickly became a mill town, as it was situated in between the East and West branches of the Housatonic River, and was also home to breweries and other factories that harnessed the power of the river for production. During the early 19th century, sheep were introduced from Spain, and the wool industry began to take off.¹ The Taconic Woolen Mill, Pontoosuc Woolen Mills, and Pittsfield Woolen Mill were all on the West Branch of the Housatonic River throughout the 1800s, and employed likely close to 1,000 workers during their most productive years.² In the early 20th century, though, the wool industry began to lose its prowess around the time Stanley Electric Manufacturing created its first transistor. This business soon grew into the corporate giant known as General Electric. In 1930, Pittsfield’s population had grown to 30,000 and GE employed 13,000 workers in the city. However, GE began to relocate branches of its industry, and the town experienced a harsh decline in the latter part of the 19th century.

Today, Pittsfield has a population of 46,632 and has a median income of $45,206, which is 36% lower than the state average.³ It is a town known for its PCB-contaminated river due to

¹ https://www.cityofpittsfield.org/residents/history_of_pittsfield/index.php
² https://milltour.org/2014/06/22/pontoosuc-woolen-mill/
³ https://www.cleargov.com/massachusetts/berkshire/city/pittsfield/2017/demographics
General Electric’s harmful practices. Despite a difficult recent history, Pittsfield is a town filled with people committed to creating enriching and supportive environments and communities, which has been essential for this project.

Community Profile/History:

The Westside neighborhood is one of the oldest historically Black communities in the Berkshires, with a rich history and culture. Its ties to the Black community largely stem from its ties to the Second Congregational Church, which was founded in 1846 as a way for the city's black community to escape the racism it encountered at First Congregational, making it one of the oldest black-serving churches in the country. The first pastor of the church was Samuel Harrison, who also served as chaplain for the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in the Civil War, the first Black unit mustered in the North.⁴

Census data from tract 900600 in the city of Pittsfield is similar to that of Westside neighborhood. From data gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau, we see that tract 900600 has a 21% unemployment rate, compared to only 9.9% in all of Pittsfield. Also, 21% of families have a yearly income of less than $10,000, compared to 6.2% in all of Pittsfield. Racially, census tract 900600 is 17.3% black, while Pittsfield is 4.8% black. Perhaps most strikingly, the data shows that in this region, 41.4% of all families have income in the last 12 months that is below the poverty line, while in Pittsfield overall, this rate is 14.2% (Table 1). This data confirms that the Westside neighborhood is one of the most at-risk neighborhoods in Pittsfield.

⁴ African American History In the Upper Housatonic Valley
Table 1: Comparison of Population Profile Statistics
(Westside Neighborhood v. city of Pittsfield v. Massachusetts State)

Figure 1: Map of Westside Neighborhood in Pittsfield, MA
Environmental Planning and the Westside:

The Westside neighborhood currently has few active businesses and conventional commercial gathering places (e.g. coffee shops, restaurants, etc.). Thus, in many ways, the places community members can gather and interact are limited by the parks and churches in the neighborhood – the spaces in which anyone from the community can freely meet. As shown in the map above, the Westside has an extensive pre-existing network of parks, making this an incredibly walkable and environmentally-friendly neighborhood, especially due to its proximity to the town center.

Not only do the parks serve as gathering places for members of the Westside community, they are areas where identities of neighborhood residents are formed and reaffirmed. The different features of the various parks enable like-minded visitors to meet and share experiences. For example, the basketball courts at Durant Park invite those looking to play basketball, amongst other things, while the children’s playground at Carrie Bak Park appeals to families with young children looking to get outside and play. In this sense, visitors to the different parks self-select based on their interests and needs.

Westside Riverway Park Project:

Over the course of the last ten years, the City of Pittsfield has acquired and cleared several plots of land along Dewey Avenue, between Prospect and Linden Streets in the Westside neighborhood. This land will be made into a park for the community and thus will enter into a pre-existing park network in this neighborhood. Tessa Kelly and Tanu Kumar, the architect and designer of this future park, have made it their priority to engage with the community in the
Westside and determine their needs so that the park will have the most positive impact possible on this at-risk community. Part of this engagement involves learning more about the history of the surrounding parks and about their current uses in order to ensure the effectiveness of the Westside Riverway Park.

Head of the Parks Department in Pittsfield, Jim McGrath, informed us that the most successful parks are those that have ownership by the community in which they are situated. Many Westside parks have had this – their histories are dotted with innumerable examples of community engagements and partnerships, many of which we were unable to unearth for this study. By analyzing these histories, we can piece together a larger history of community engagement and activism in the Westside neighborhood, and can begin to think about how to foster that in a future park. This document serves to help understand and conceptualize the network of existing parks throughout the Westside (i.e. how they developed, and how they are used today, and at what points the community has engaged with them) to situate the new Westside Riverway Park within that dynamic social, physical, and ecological system. After examining the individual histories of each park, we will draw larger conclusions about what may have been occurring to inform certain decisions that were made.

**Methodology:**

Information on the parks under analysis was gathered using a combination of primary source archival research and interviews with members of the community. We visited the Local History Collection in the Berkshire Athenaeum, Pittsfield’s Public Library as well as the Parks Department in City Hall to view primary source documents (e.g. newspaper clippings, photos,
letters, etc.). These findings were used to generate historical narratives of the different parks in and around the Westside neighborhood, including the contexts in which they were developed and how they fit into the larger picture of the surrounding communities.

Along with primary source analysis, we conducted qualitative interviews with various community members and stakeholders to inform contemporary questions on the role of parks within the neighborhood. This part of our methodology is elaborated upon in Section V: Interviews with Stakeholders.

III. Park Histories

Home to over 30 parks, each with their own unique background and history, Pittsfield has many places residents can choose to play. Our clients are interested in telling the stories of the parks used by members of the Westside neighborhood in order to situate the new Westside Riverway Park within a pre-existing network of culturally significant green spaces that currently surround Westside neighborhood residents. These parks are: Burbank Park, Pontoosuc Park, Durant/Pitt Park, Wahconah Park, Coolidge Playground, Carrie Bak/Dewey Park, Dorothy Amos Park, and Tucker Park. We will tell these histories in the order of the parks’ chronological establishment. A map of the entire network of parks, each of which will be discussed individually in this report, can be found below in Figure 2.
Burbank Park:

Burbank Park on Onota lake is a favorite summer destination for those looking to relax, play in the water, or to listen to music at one of several summer music festivals. Burbank Park
was donated to the City of Pittsfield by Abraham Burbank in 1890 upon his death and compromise over his will. The City at this time acquired 60 acres of land on the east shore of Onota Lake. The amount of land owned by the City in this area has been growing since. For many years, due to its distance from Pittsfield’s downtown, the land was largely ignored. In the 1940s, when automobiles were becoming more and more prevalent, Burbank Park saw an influx of growth and development. In 1973, a detailed design was created for the park that included a fish pier, boat launch, a junior ski area, and a sports area (Figure 3). Burbank Park has always been a site of recreation and interaction with the beautiful waters of Onota lake. In June of 1986, the Park Commission voted to create separate areas for swimming, boating, and wind surfing in the lake by Burbank Park, in order to increase safety for park patrons. Also, in 1986, the City of Pittsfield was awarded a $425,700 grant to improve and expand facilities on the lake, which ultimately lead to the construction of a large beach house at the park, which was completed in 1989. It contained restrooms and changing rooms, along with concession stands and offices for lifeguards and maintenance staff. Finally, in 1997, Pittsfield received another grant of $499,800 for continued improvements. Burbank Park is evidently one of the oldest, largest, and most well maintained parks in the city, and is used by many members of the Westside.

5 July 26, 1913 Pittsfield Journal
6 July 13, 1941 Springfield Republican
7 March 19, 1973 Berkshire Eagle
8 June 18, 1986 Berkshire Eagle
9 August 8, 1989 Berkshire Eagle
10 December 9, 1997 Berkshire Eagle
Compared to the other parks, Burbank is much larger and farther removed from the heart of the Westside neighborhood. It thus serves a different purpose, which is reflected in its history. Burbank Park is a destination, largely in the summertime, for the entirety of the Pittsfield community. While it is used by many members of the Westside, it is also used by many others in the entire City of Pittsfield.

Pontoosuc Park on Pontoosuc Lake:

The original park built near Pontoosuc Lake was one of the first parks in all of Pittsfield, and was financed not by the municipality of Pittsfield but by a committee of citizens funded by the Park and Playground Association, which the land was purchased for in 1911. In 1913, the city took over and a commission appointed by the mayor bought even more land on the south shore of Pontoosuc Lake. In 1914, the city gave $3,000 and the Park and Playground Association
gave $2,000 to operate playgrounds at Pontoosuc Lake, and several other parks across the city.\textsuperscript{11} Today, Pontoosuc Park is a favorite spot for those who enjoy spending time at the lake, and represents one of the oldest parks in Pittsfield.

\textit{Pitt/Durant Park:}

In 1910, the Park and Playground Association bought the land for Pitt Park for $7,500, which was largely raised by loans. In 1914, the city gave $3,000 and the Park and Playground Association gave $2,000 to develop playgrounds at Pitt park, as well as several other parks across the city. In 1966, the Eagle Street Realty Trust paid $1,000 for an 82-foot by 123-foot expansion on the small park.\textsuperscript{12} Today, the 2.1 acre lot on the corner of John St. and Columbus Avenue is a wide open green space with a softball field, basketball court, playground, and plenty of open green-space. The West Branch of the Housatonic River flows directly next to the park, but is separated by a tall chain link fence that makes it impossible to interact with or even observe the river and the wildlife in and around it.

In 2015, there was a community led effort to rename the park after Rev. Willard and Rosemary Durant. Many remember the couple for their service as executive director and program director at the Christian Center in Pittsfield for 25 years, and for their community contributions to the West Side neighborhood.

One of the most significant features of Durant Park is that it has hosted the annual Gather-In festival, sponsored and organized by the Berkshire County branch of the NAACP since its origin in 1973. The event, free and open to all, invites families from all over Berkshire

\textsuperscript{11} Willison, George. \textit{The History of Pittsfield Massachusetts.}  
\textsuperscript{12} July 19, 1966, Berkshire Eagle - “Eagle Trust Buys Lot For Play Area”
county to take part in Berkshire County’s first and only traditionally African-American neighborhood festival. At the event, activities range from a basketball tournament, games for children, musical performances, and concessions from different food trucks and vendors (Figure 4). The event is looked forward to by many neighborhood residents as an opportunity to come together and celebrate the historically African-American community in one of the area’s most cherished parks. Although attendance at the festival is consistently high, conversations with community members reveal that today there are fewer free-of-charge programming events for kids than there have been historically.

![1984 Poster Advertising the NAACP’s Annual Gather-In Festival](image)

**Figure 4:** 1984 Poster Advertising the NAACP’s Annual Gather-In Festival

Even without the Gather-In festival, Durant Park has consistently served the Westside neighborhood as a community rallying point since its birth in the early 1900s. In 2015, a group of high-school students came together to create a mural eclipsing a graffiti-covered shelter in the
middle of what was at the time Pitt Park (Figure 5). Additionally, in 2016, groups of community volunteers helped to install new playground equipment as part of a revitalization project.  

**Figure 5: Berkshire Eagle - July 31, 2015**

*Wahconah Park:*

The historic Wahconah Park is remarkably different from many of the other Pittsfield parks. In 1909, Judge Charles L. Hibbard, an early advocate for the growing parks system in Pittsfield, encouraged the city to purchase a 102-acre plot between a small stretch of Wahconah Street and the swamp bordering the West branch of the Housatonic River. The land was eventually purchased for $10,000 in 1919, city officials were convinced that the land was more valuable than the bog, home to only a few small birds and insects. Soon after, at the beginning  

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13 July 31, 2015, The Berkshire Eagle  
14 October 22, 2016, The Berkshire Eagle  
15 Berkshire Eagle, July 26, 1992
of the 1920s, construction of a baseball diamond began, giving city ball leagues a new home field.

Since its birth in the early 20th century, Wahconah Park has developed an intimacy and personality not unlike any great ballpark. In 1924, Lou Gehrig, famous first-baseman for the New York Yankees, hit one out of the park and into the Housatonic River during a minor league game for the Houston Senators.\textsuperscript{16} In 1950, the grandstand still in existence today was constructed, and from 1965-1988 a series of Eastern League teams used Wahconah as their home park. Today, the park is home to the Pittsfield Suns of the FCBL who invite sports fanatics in the Berkshires to come together under the iconic park lights during the hot summer months.

However, the park is for more than just baseball fans. Behind the bright lights and towering green wall of the stadium is a small boat launch encouraging local paddlers to get out and explore the natural beauty of the Housatonic River. Additionally, adjacent to the parking lot is an open grassy field and a basketball court.

\textsuperscript{16} https://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/pondering-next-pitch,466040
Coolidge Park:

In 1925, a small plot on Garden Street was opened as a gift from the music patron and renowned chamber pianist, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Coolidge, born and raised in Chicago, moved to Pittsfield with her family in 1904. Coming from an extremely wealthy family, Coolidge used her immense fortune to donate generous gifts to the community. In addition to the playground, Coolidge sponsored the eventual world renowned Berkshire String Quartet, built a Tower of Chamber Music near her home in Pittsfield, and sponsored several South Mountain Chamber Music festivals there in the early 1920s.

By 1972, this original small plot of land had grown to be quite large, taking up all of the space of Coolidge Park, as well as the area now occupied by the Conte School. In 1972, the Park Commission released five acres of Coolidge Park for use to construct a new school in the
Westside, in exchange for a promise that the School Department would develop twenty one other park acres for school recreation use. This new school, at the time referred to as the “West Side community school,” would replace the Tucker School, whose history is explained later on in the Tucker Park section. The West Side Community School (plan shown in Figure 7) opened in the fall of 1974, but was originally protested by many members of the Westside due to the lack of busing and resulting unsafe walk for children to school each morning.

Figure 7: Plan for Westside Community School in Coolidge Park

Today, Coolidge Park has summer programming and a community garden run by the Westside Initiative. It is located just north of the Conte School (renamed in 1991 for a 34-year congressional representative for the Berkshires) and has a large, open green space as well as assorted exercise equipment.

17 July 10, 1972 Berkshire Eagle
18 July 13, 1972 Berkshire Eagle
19 August 30, 1974 Berkshire Eagle
20 September 16, 1991 Berkshire Eagle
Carrie Bak/Dewey Park:

On the corner of Danforth and Dewey Ave., there’s a small children’s park with a bright, pinwheel-colored playground, a reserved picnic area, a hidden wildlife viewing tower, and a small lot of green space. The first mention of this park comes in a 1959 correspondence, where it was discussed to move the equipment and fencing from a former “Francis Avenue Playground” to a lot of land on the corner of Danforth and Dewey Avenue in order to make room for new homes to be constructed. The park was officially completed in 1961. In 1966, a petition signed by over one hundred community members urged the city to invest in a water fountain at the park, which was later installed. In 1987, community members took park maintenance into their own hands after being let down by the city and were featured in the Berkshire Eagle. This shows that the park has a deep history of community engagement and support.

At the time of its inception in 1960, it was named Dewey Park, after the street it is on and Admiral George Dewey, hero of the Spanish-American war. In 1995, however, the small park took on a new name paying homage to a modern day hero. Carrie Bak, a crossing guard for Pittsfield Public schools for over 30 years, was beloved by the community for looking after the children of the neighborhood as they crossed the busy street on their way to school. Although her primary responsibility was to keep the children safe from hurried drivers, she stashed tissues for kids with runny noses and kept a few extra quarters for those who forgot their lunch money. Today, Carrie Bak Children’s Playground and the surrounding park reminds individuals of the community icon every time they share a picnic lunch with their friends, or try and spot a great blue heron from the viewing tower.

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21 May 18, 1959 correspondence between Mayor and Park Board
22 July 8, 1966 letter to the City of Pittsfield
23 Carolyn Bak Obituary, Berkshire Eagle
Dorothy Amos Park:

From the 1920s through the 1950s, the area of land that is now Dorothy Amos Park was the Perlman Scrapyard. During this time period, General Electric was making transistors using PCBs as lubricants. PCB stands for polychlorinated biphenyl, and they are yellow, oily chemicals that were primarily used as lubricants in electrical equipment. The General Electric plant in Pittsfield was likely one of the largest producers of this chemical, and thus produced a lot of contaminated waste, much of which went into scrap yards around the city, including the land where Dorothy Amos Park now lies upon. However, in 1979, the synthesis of PCBs was banned in the U.S. after they were determined to be possible carcinogens in humans.

In the early 1970s, as a part of the Jubilee Hill Renewal Project, there was a push for the area to be developed into a community park. An original development plan of the site\textsuperscript{24} shows that paved play courts, sitting areas, a pavilion structure, and a “Tot Lot” were all considered for

\textsuperscript{24} December 6, 1972, Development Program: West Side Park. John W. Tullock Jr.
inclusion in the final design. Then, in 1975, the scrapyard was finally donated to the city as a park, but scars from the area’s polluted past remained and questions over the environmental quality of the land lingered. Twenty-three years later, in 1998, GE spent a lot of money trying to clean up the mess they had made around the city of Pittsfield. During this process, they replaced a significant amount of PCB-contaminated soil in the park with clean, new soil (though they did not touch the river), as well as built basketball courts. However, the cleanup was not sufficient in removing the chemicals from the soil, necessitating another clean up in 2008 and 2009, during which both the park and the river had substantial amounts of contaminated soil removed and replaced. Despite this cleanup, today Dorothy Amos has a tall chain link fence that is threaded with vines, making the river inaccessible and almost invisible to patrons of the park.

The park gets it name from a community leader, educator, and activist named Dorothy Amos (Figure 9). A member of the Westside, Amos graduated from Pittsfield High School, received a BA from Ohio State College, and an MA from North Adams State. She went on to become the first black guidance counselor in the Pittsfield school system. In 1971, she received a $70,000 grant, which allowed her to found and open the Early Childhood Development Center, which cared for fifty children from low-income families in the area. She was remembered for her tireless activism in the Westside neighborhood, and in particular, her service to the youth of the community. The development of a park then is a fitting memorial in her honor, providing a safe place for children of the neighborhood to enjoy for years to come.
Today, Dorothy Amos park is one of the most beautiful in Pittsfield, with basketball courts, an extensive playground, and open green space. Its central location encourages frequent visitation from community members, and the various park features offer visitors many different ways to enjoy the park. In 1988, the Gather-In festival historically held exclusively in Pitt/Durant Park, sought to expand to Dorothy Amos Park in order to include a girl’s basketball tournament alongside the annual men’s games. The park stands today as a living, cherished monument to the outstanding resilience of the Westside neighborhood, as well as the compassion and determination of those who call it home.

Correspondence between Gather-In ‘88 Committee and the City of Pittsfield Parks Commission, March 1, 1988
*Tucker Park:*

The current location of Tucker Park was previously a school in the Westside from 1888-1974.\(^{26}\) The school started as Kindergarten through twelfth grade, and then changed to Kindergarten through sixth grade.\(^{27}\) While it was a school, many students would eat lunch across the street at the Christian Center. In 1974, it ceased to be a school and instead functioned as a community center, with boxing in the basement, and family services.\(^{28}\) The building burned down on Friday, November 12, 1976 and was demolished (Figure 10).\(^{29}\) It was decided that a park would be put in this now empty lot adjacent to the Christian Center. The park was completed on August 18, 1880, after a significant and rigorous process of park design and neighborhood feedback. The firm designing the park was named Scape Unlimited, and William Burbank was the principal of this firm at the time. At the ribbon cutting of the park in the fall of 1880, Shirley Hamilton was a featured guest. According to a correspondence from 1880, Hamilton “has sponsored innumerable block and birthday parties for children and youth in the neighborhood.” She is identified as a lifetime volunteer and board member at the Christian Center and was the guest of honor at this opening ceremony for the park. In October of 1980, a drinking fountain was installed in the park for a cost of $2,883.

Over the years, Tucker park has served as the location for many basketball tournaments and other community events. It continues to hold much of the culture and history that was instilled in it through those who pushed for its creation.

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\(^{26}\) Berkshire Eagle January 10, 1981  
\(^{27}\) Barbara Bizzi, Christian Center Meeting  
\(^{28}\) Tony Jackson, Conversation  
\(^{29}\) Berkshire Eagle November 15, 1976
Summary:

Evidently, each park in the Westside has its own story. In the 1970s, there was a surge of involvement in and around the parks in this neighborhood. This was a time when business at General Electric was good, and it employed thousands of working-class people across the city. This period of security is reflected in the parks. Currently, the Westside neighborhood is not in a period of security and good employment, which is also reflected in the current state of and use of the parks. This shows that the Westside Riverway Park has the potential to jumpstart another period of park engagement and activity.

It is also interesting and pertinent to think about each park’s relationship with the water. The Westside Riverway Park will intentionally engage with the West Branch of the Housatonic River, so we must learn from the other parks and their engagement with the water, or lack thereof. Burbank Park on Onota lake is the only park that really centers the water as the focal
point, and community members seem to have enjoyed using that water for recreation. Dorothy Amos and Durant Park, however, have created obstacles that hinder community members’ engagement with the river that runs directly beside them. This is likely due to the relative safety of a large pool of water versus a river that can have a surprisingly strong current in certain seasons. The way each park is structured and used is a reflection upon the Westside’s past and present, and is crucial to consider as decisions are made about the Westside Riverway Park.

IV. Environmental History

*General Electric and Pollution in Pittsfield:*

This information was gathered by referencing various pages on [www.thebeatnews.org](http://www.thebeatnews.org) website. From 1929 until 1979, when the EPA banned the use of Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) due to their carcinogenic character, General Electric (GE) synthesized these chemicals and used them in the manufacture of their transformers. According to the former Manager of Tests at the Power Transformer division at GE, the GE facility, located directly on the East Branch of the Housatonic river, was producing “one hundred and forty thousand pounds of PCBs a week” during this period. He adds, “we had a loss rate: spillage, overfilling, of about 3%, so this says that every week we would lose between four and five thousand pounds of PCBs that would go down into the drain and into the river.” Not only did the PCBs go into the river, but they were also distributed around the city in the form of “free fill” that GE would leave outside of its warehouse. Since these times of pollution, GE has paid millions of dollars in clean up projects in the east branch of the Housatonic River and around Pittsfield. However, traces of this toxic past remain in Pittsfield.
Present Environmental State:

After talking with John Ziegler of the Massachusetts DEP, we can confidently say that comprehensive tests of the river quality of the west branch of the Housatonic River were conducted in 2000. During this time, they took 400 sediment samples and 200 riverbank soil samples from just upstream of Dorothy Amos Park and approximately 2 miles down the west branch of the Housatonic to confluence of the east and west branches of the Housatonic River. Of these 600 samples, the only section of the park that was found to have significant PCB pollution was the area of the river around Dorothy Amos Park. In 2008-2009 this section of the river was remediated, along with the top 16 feet of soil in the park itself.

In 2007, the Massachusetts DEP conducted testing on 72 test-pits in the King Street Dump, which is directly across the river from Wahconah Park, north of the future Westside Riverway Park. These test pits and groundwater sampling revealed non-detectable levels of PCBs in this area.

With this information, we can say that recreation along the West Branch of the Housatonic River is safe. That being said, it is still not advised to drink the water. Additionally, it is advised not to eat fish caught on the west branch because fish from the more polluted east branch and lower Housatonic River can still get to this section and may have bioaccumulated high levels of PCBs. In its 2017 report, the Connecticut Department of Public Health advises not to eat most species of fish caught on the Housatonic.

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30 2000 Mass DEP PCB Report
31 2007 King Street Dump Report
Recreation such as canoeing, wading, and general exploring, however, is highly encouraged, and is quite easy to do.

V. Interviews with Stakeholders

Our research has involved both interviews in person and on the phone with important stakeholders in our project, including members from various community organizations and municipal administrators involved in the development of the new park. Below is a list of those interviewed:

Dennis Regan - Berkshire Director of the Housatonic Valley Association
Jane Wynn - Executive Director of the Berkshire Environmental Action Team
John Ziegler - Western Regional Office of Massachusetts Dept. of Environmental Protection
Tony Jackson, Troy Jackson, Samantha Adams, Beverly Bolden - Westside Past/Present Community Members
Ann-Marie Harris, Kathleen Reilly - Local History Department of the Public Library
Jim McGrath - Natural Resource Program Manager for the City of Pittsfield
Michael Wynn - Police Department Chief
Barbara Bizzi - Westside Initiative
Several Christian Center Leaders and Patrons

From interviews with community members, we hoped to gain insight into the different cultural and societal services that parks in Pittsfield have provided to the community. Our interviews themselves were qualitative due to the survey of knowledge we hoped to gain from these conversations.

Our interview respondents were broadly categorized into two groups: community members and informed advisors. Conversations with community members typically developed by chance at either two of the community engagement events put on by the Westside Riverway Park Planning team. We spoke with the community at the Westside Halloween Block Party and a
lunch at the Christian Center listening to ways individuals currently use the network of parks in Pittsfield, as well as any park history that they may have been involved in or had some particular insight on. Conversations with our second group of respondents, informed advisors, typically were the result of a scheduled meeting or phone call. Interviews with informants had a narrow focus based on the expertise of that individual. For example, we met with the police chief to learn about the different safety considerations important to take into account with the development of the new park, while our meeting with Dennis Regan from the Housatonic Valley Association which regarded the environmental stories important in conveying to future park patrons as well as different recreational possibilities connected with the river.

What all of these interviews had in common is that they were designed to involve the community and others that will benefit most from the new park as much as possible in the planning process. Responses gathered from these conversations inform the following recommendations, which we hope will be taken into consideration in the design of the new Westside Riverway Park. Direct quotations from many of these interviews and events can be found in Appendix A.

Concerns about the Park:

From conversations with the leaders of the NAACP and members of the congregation of the Second Congregational Church in the Westside, several concerns about the park have been vocalized. Many of these concerns are related to supervision at the park and concerns about its proximity to Pitt/Durant Park. First, it was vocalized that having Park Counselors of some sort for the summer is critically important if one of the aspects of the park will be summertime events
and play. This was raised in the context of Durant Park, where there have not been counselors funded by the City in past years. Secondly, some are concerned about the proximity to Durant Park, fearing that the future park will take city money and potential patrons away from Durant Park. It has thus come to Tessa’s and Tanu’s attention that it could be helpful to create some sort of walking loop to Durant Park, and ensure that the two parks address distinctly different needs in the community.

*Physical Recommendations:*

We recommend that the new Westside Riverway Park should provide new, active opportunities for children. Many of the respondents interviewed stressed the importance of parks in Pittsfield, particularly in relation to giving children in the community access to unique forms of recreation. Although many of the parks in Pittsfield already provide traditional playgrounds, basketball courts, and kickball diamonds, we suggest that the new park include infrastructure that encourages forms of recreation that are currently absent in the Westside community. For example, a “natural” playground can facilitate a more intimate relationship between community members and the natural features of the Westside neighborhood while also thematically setting the new park apart from those preexisting.

We also suggest that the new park should commemorate historically influential members of the Westside neighborhood. Although there are different ways this commemoration may manifest itself, we believe that some form of plaque or other physical device be used to facilitate connection between future park patrons and those individuals responsible for historically shaping shared attitudes and cultures that still exist in the neighborhood today.
The development of a new recreational space in an area of such close proximity to a pre-existing network of other parks creates the opportunity for a potential “loop walk,” guiding patrons around the various parks in and around the Westside neighborhood. Such a walk, in celebration of the concerted park system, should expose visitors to the unique and differential features of each space through a facilitated interpretive experience.

Activities/Programming Recommendations:

A common thread amongst parks in the Westside neighborhood is their role as community gathering spaces. The new Westside Riverway park should consistently host events that bring kids and the community together involving music, film, and dance. Many of our interviewed respondents revealed that the new park should serve as a space to host block parties and other community events, potentially involving film and music.

We also believe that the location of the park ideally positions the space to be used as an informal education space to inform park patrons about the environmental and cultural history of both the Housatonic River and the Westside neighborhood as a whole. The site of the new park runs adjacent to the west branch of the Housatonic River, a feature of several pre-existing parks. However, considering that most of these parks engage with the river minimally, the new site is uniquely positioned to engage the community and fill existing gaps in public knowledge of the historical significance and recreational potential of the waterway.

Another theme commonly raised in conversations with community members was the dearth of after school opportunities that currently exist for youth in the Westside neighborhood. Due to its central location in the neighborhood, we recommend that the new Westside Riverway
Park be a space for structured, supervised play for children within the community. In particular, we recommend that there be a paid “Park Supervisor” position, ideally occupied by another community member roughly between 18-24 years old, to look after children playing in the park after school and during the summer months.

*Safety Recommendations:*

One concern commonly raised by both members of the community and our informed advisors was the need for different safety features to be incorporated into the final design of the park. In particular, we recommend that both effective lighting and some form of natural barrier between the park and the river be considered. Respondents hope that strategic lighting of the park will deter any nefarious activity that the new green space could potentially invite after dark. Ground level lighting that radiates outwards from the center of the park was recommended by the Pittsfield Police Dept. as it limits blind areas where suspects can hide while still providing ample and appropriate lighting for those using the park around dusk. Many respondents also indicated their desire for a barrier between the park and the Housatonic River in order to keep children from falling into the water. We recommend that a combination of different native shrubs and thorny bushes be used to limit the possibility of an accident, while maintaining a natural aesthetic. Although it is important that the park be used as a teaching space to engage with the river, we don’t want families interested in using the park to be concerned with safety in or around the body of water.
Community Partners:

It has become clear to us that to ensure future engagement with the park, it will likely become important to continue to foster partnerships and organize programming with various organizations in the neighborhood and in Pittsfield. Many of these partnerships have already begun. Some of the potential partners are listed here:

- Westside Christian Center
- Westside Neighborhood Initiative
- Parks Department of Pittsfield
- Police Department of Pittsfield
- Berkshire Environmental Action Team
- Housatonic Valley Association
- Pittsfield Second Congregational Church
- Price Memorial AME Zion Church
- Working Cities Pittsfield
- The Westside Legends
- Jacob’s Pillow
- Marilyn Hamilton Sports & Literacy Program
- Conte School

VI. Conclusion

Parks are integral to communities as places to gather, share experiences, and celebrate collective ideals. Our research for this project reveals the rich history of the park network already existing in and around the Westside neighborhood, and explores how the planning and development of the new Westside Riverway Park can best situate itself within this community framework. Planning efforts for the new park should emphasize features that complement or add to pre-existing park experiences, rather than attempt to replicate or replace elements that current spaces already offer. Gathered feedback from the community should be taken into consideration to ensure local needs are addressed. The best parks, those which fully establish themselves
within the fabric of communities, rely on relentless buy in and support from the neighborhood residents for whom they were designed.
Appendix A:

Stakeholder Feedback

Physical Recommendations for the WRP

- [For Adults] “a shelter for reading” (Christian Center)
- “A place for conversation about community efforts” (Christian Center)
- “Rock climbing/ other active opportunities” (Christian Center)
- “Binoculars overlooking river” (Christian Center)
- “Lighting, bathrooms, pavilion (scheduled for specific events), history displays, bilingual signs, colors(?), track for toy cars(?), safety at river’s edge.” (Christian Center)
- “Soft, spongy surface instead of wood chips” (Phoenix, Christian Center)
- “Concessions or food” (Samantha Mathis, Christian Center)
- “Large shelter for rain, large gathering area” (Christian Center)
- “Under a large pavilion with access to phone charging dock, vending machines (healthy choices).” (Samantha Mathis Christian Center)
- “Thorny/berry bushes to keep kids within a safe distance from the river” (Chief Wynn)
- “There needs to be some sort of fence to keep kids from getting ‘swept away’” (Block Party)
- It’s ok to play in when it’s shallow, but when the current picks up it’s no longer safe (Block Party)
- As long as there is some sort of supervision, it is ok for kids to play in the river (Block Party)
- Potentially there could be a gate with a lock on it that only gets unlocked when there is supervision at the river to ensure safety (Block Party)
- “walking/running loop around the entire perimeter with some small exercise equipment along the way” (Block Party)
- “Large things for the kids to climb on and around” (Block Party, Troy)
- “wall of honor for past residents of the West Side who have gone on to do outstanding things with their lives (Stephanie Wilson, others…” (Block Party, Troy)
- “Pool”, “family center”, “a community center” (Women’s Circle)
- “Slide” (Children)
- “Hide and seek” (Children)
- “Monkey Bars” (Children)
- “Water fountain, bathrooms” (Children)
- “A shelter for when it rains or shade for when it’s hot” (Children, Carissa)
- “Art shed” (Children, Nijayla)
- “Swing” (Children)
- “Indoor basketball court” (Children)
- “Climb around, run up, run down” (Children, Jasir)
- “Field games, soccer, kickball, etc.” (Women’s Circle)
- “Workout equipment, replace grass with sod, mascot, bikeshare locations, website, social media” (Women’s Circle)
- “Grass activities, bocce, volleyball, badminton” (Women’s Circle)
- “Monkey bars, bridges” (Women’s Circle)
- “Volleyball, badminton net” (Women’s Circle)
- “A big slide, racer skating rink” (Women’s Circle)

Event/Programming Recommendations for the WRP
- “Wide range of traditional and non-traditional sports. Educational and nature-science/stem programs. Free play. School visits” (Christian Center)
- [For Kids] “activities that are unique -- not swinging” (Christian Center)
- “Sit together, do activities, dancing” (Christian Center)
- “Double Dutch tournaments” (Christian Center)
- “Movie night” (Christian Center)
- “Things for kids to show off what they like to do” (Christian Center)
- “Kids want to be in the parks” (Christian Center)
- “Music and art events- especially for teens” (Christian Center)
- “Bring us closer to the river” (Christian Center)
- “Bring positivity to the neighborhood” (Christian Center)
- “Boat rides”
- Get kids in the Westside in boats on land first, then in the water (Chief Wynn)
- “The safe parks in the Westside are the ones where the community takes ownership/initiative” (Chief Wynn)
- Community flashlight walk with Police team (Chief Wynn)
- Bring educational meaning to the park related to the river (Christian Center)
- Natural and how river has acted as a resource to the community (Christian Center)
- “There is a need for educational programming to teach kids about the river and the park and the history of the area. This programming could be done by members of the community themselves” (Block Party)
- “Would be great if there could be a focus on exercise/ activity for both kids and adults, but different than the other parks” (Block Party)
- “I think we should give the children what they want to bring them out into the community” (Women’s Circle)
- “School programs or weekend gathering get together spot for teens” (Women’s Circle)
- “Gardening”/ “Environmental Education” (Women’s Circle)
- “Park upkeep, community gardening projects” (Women’s Circle)
- “Block parties, something for the elderly, outdoor/indoor space for church events” (Women’s Circle)
- “Yoga, Tai chi (in the pavilion)” (Women’s Circle)
- “Music, we need a park monitor” (Women’s Circle)
- “Dancing, yoga” (Women’s Circle)
- “Craft fair, temporary booths/farmer’s market” (Women’s Circle)
- “Volleyball/bocce league, yoga, tai chi” (Women’s Circle)
- “Wide range of traditional and non-traditional sports, educational and nature-science/STEM programs.” (Women’s Circle)
- “Bike riding/sledding” (Women’s Circle)

Safety Recommendations for the WRP
- “Good lighting at night” (Christian Center)
- “I want it to be well lit and used; a place people aren’t afraid” (Women’s Circle, Robbie Brassard)
- “Well lit! Lighting is everything” (Women’s Circle, Michelle Hill)
- “No traffic, adult supervision, WATER SAFETY” (Women’s Circle)
- “Need community supervisors -- could be veterans, people who aren’t working” (Women’s Circle)
- Need to be able to get a motorcycle and mountain bike over the bridge (Chief Wynn)
- “Ground level lighting from the center of the park facing outwards” (Chief Wynn)
- RPI lighting experts could be able to help here (safe, interesting, economical) (Jim McGrath)
- Bathrooms
  - Transparent idea is good (Chief Wynn)
  - Time locks are easy to defeat (Chief Wynn)
  - Incredibly expensive, maybe just porta johns (Jim McGrath)
- Cameras
  - Once there can be wifi all over the city, this would be good to have cameras in the park (Chief Wynn)