

Shaker Heights Recreation Strategic Plan

Executive Summary

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The Recreation Strategic Plan is long-term framework developed through extensive public engagement, that prioritizes improvements to select parks and recreation facilities to provide high-quality amenities for all neighborhoods and residents.

Background + Process

The Recreation Strategic Plan builds upon a series of recent community planning efforts—including the Lee Road Action Plan and the Shaker Heights City Schools Facilities Plan—to reimagine the City’s recreational facilities in response to evolving community needs.

Over a year, the City worked closely with consultants, community groups, City leadership, City Council, and residents to shape the plan. Many hundreds of voices helped guide the vision, goals, and ideas for improvement. Each site has a clear set of recommendations reflecting the community’s values. The resulting framework aligns future recreation investments with community priorities and provides clear operational and implementation planning direction. It establishes a shared vision for the next generation of parks and recreation in Shaker Heights.

Goals

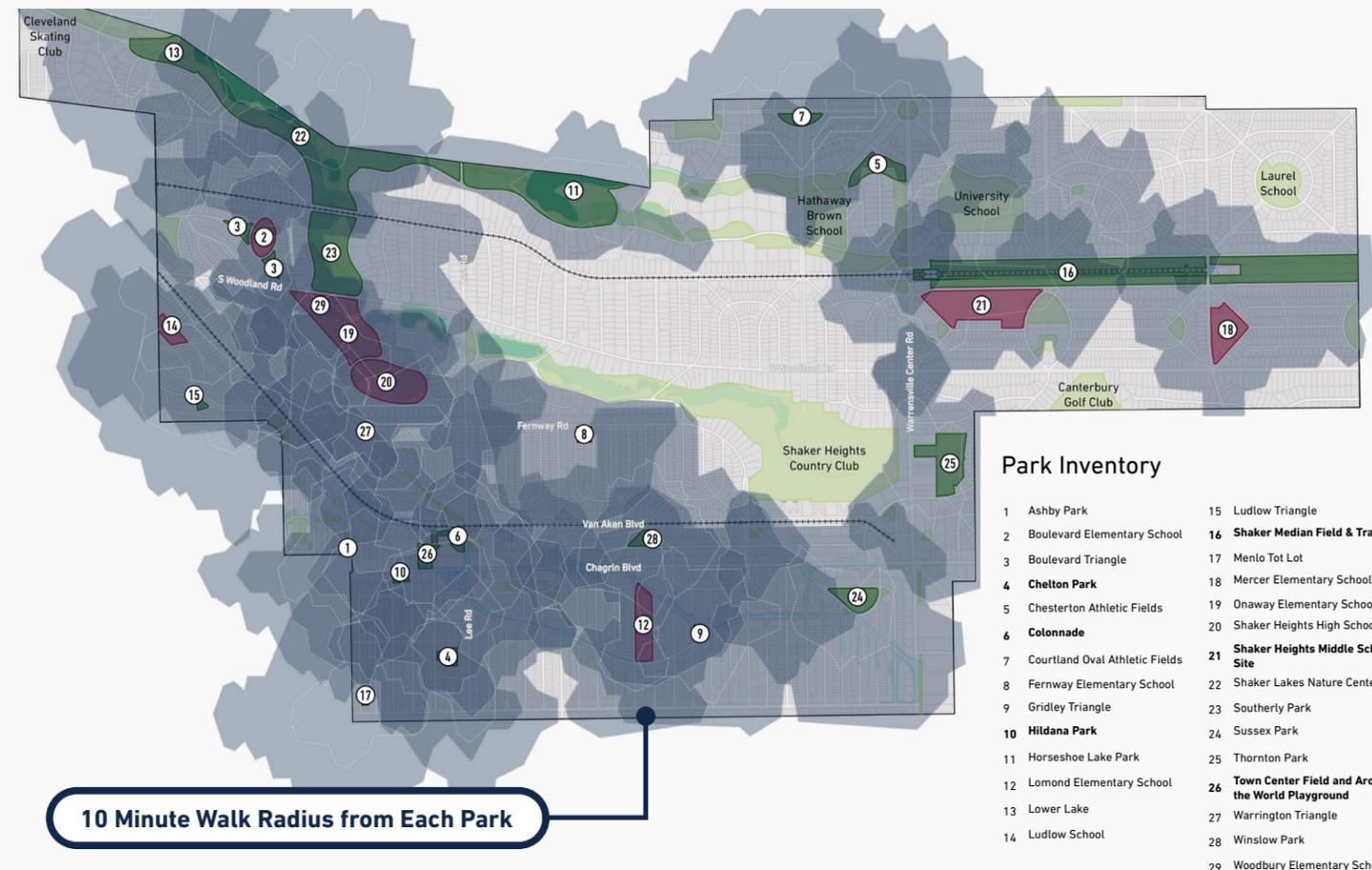
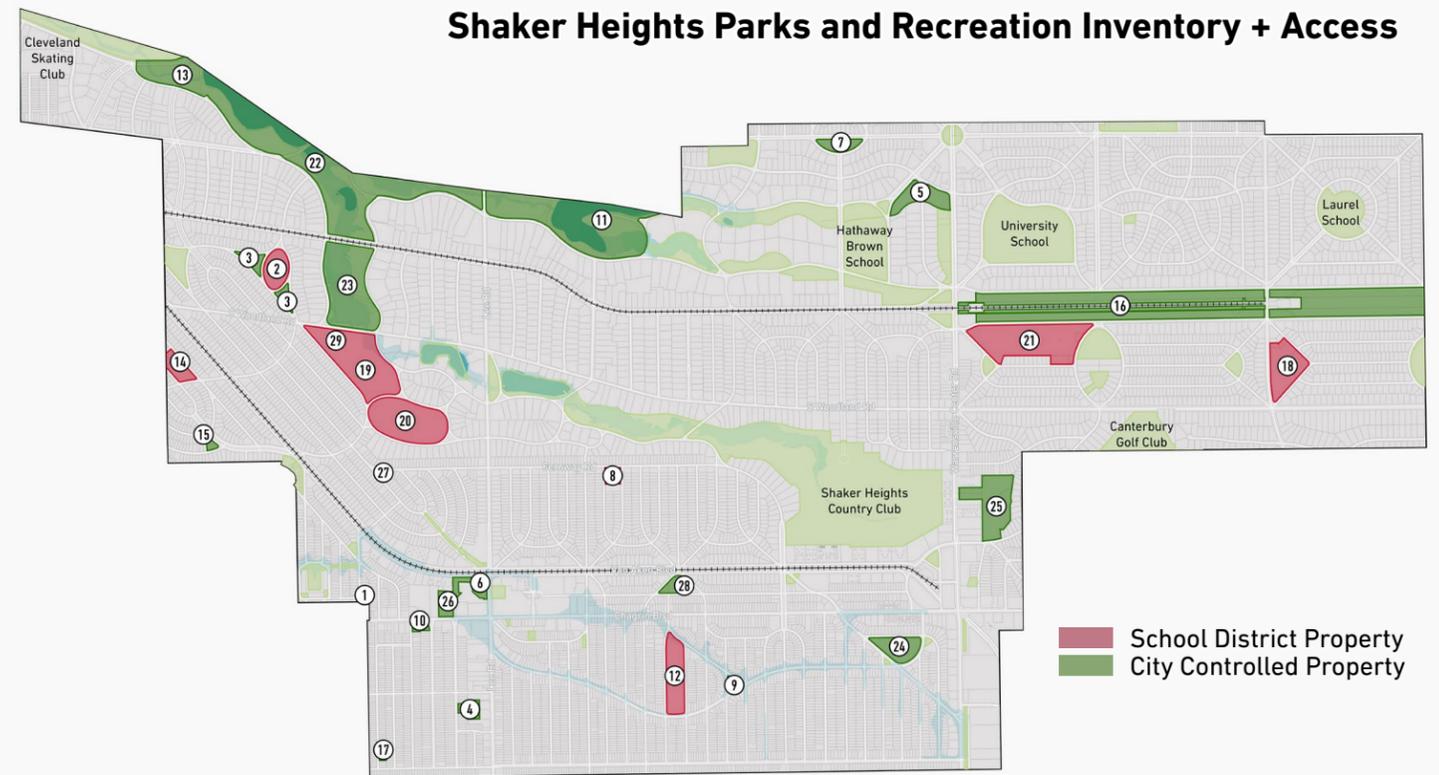
- **Encourage recreation and development** recommendations that correlate and promote prior planning efforts, such as the Forward Together Vision Plan, which stated: “Well-maintained, coordinated buildings and facilities that are adaptable, multi-functional, efficient, and utilized to their full potential.
- **Engage our diverse citizenry** of recreation users and non-users to create a strategic, focused, and coordinated plan for the key recreation sites responsive to their existing context, geographic location, and neighborhood needs
- **Recognize each sites unique potential** and programming opportunities.
- **Create a plan** that serves the diverse population and its needs.
- **Provide community facilities** that can gather and bring people together.

Sites + Demographics

This planning effort focuses on five key sites: Stephanie Tubbs Jones (STJ) Community Building Quadrant, Chelton Park, Thornton Park, Middle School, and Hildana Park. These locations are critical in meeting Shaker Heights’ long-term recreational goals and ensuring equitable access to vibrant community spaces.

To help guide future investments demographics were analyzed. This analysis showed that Shaker Heights is aging, with residents over 55 expected to make up 40% of the population by 2038. Known for its racial and ethnic diversity—34% of residents identify as Black or African American—the community is projected to become even more diverse in the coming years. The city remains economically strong, with household incomes well above national averages and expected to rise steadily through 2038. This analysis helps leadership understand who the parks serve, and how those needs may evolve.

Shaker Heights Parks and Recreation Inventory + Access



Recreation Inventory

The demographic findings were paired with an inventory of Shaker Heights' facilities and an analysis of national and local recreation trends to understand how preferences vary across age, income, and cultural groups. These insights help identify the types of parks, trails, facilities, and programs most needed to serve the community's evolving interests. This background research was completed to comprehensively understand the community's recreational assets. The inventory identifies each site's location, type, and amenities, ranging from passive natural areas with trails and benches to active parks with multi-sport and fitness facilities.

Each recreation asset was classified as City-controlled or located on school property, recognizing that school sites often serve as important community recreation spaces. This citywide inventory provides a baseline for evaluating current resources, identifying service gaps, and understanding where overlaps or unmet needs may occur. While the plan prioritizes five key sites for deeper study, this broader inventory ensures that recommendations are made based on a full understanding of how recreation amenities are distributed and accessed across Shaker Heights.

Recreation Trends + Benchmarking

A detailed analysis of national, regional, and local recreation participation trends was also conducted to inform future recreation planning in Shaker Heights. This analysis helps align the City's demographics, programming, and facility recommendations with broader patterns in how people stay active.

Recreation trends show that outdoor and fitness activities are rapidly growing in popularity nationwide, with walking, yoga, and biking among the top choices. Team sports are steadily returning post-pandemic, and pickleball is the fastest-growing sport. Over the past five years, pickleball, tennis, and trail running have seen the most significant increases in participation, while sports like softball and lacrosse have declined. Locally, Shaker Heights residents show strong interest in fitness activities, especially yoga, aerobics, and walking, and above-average participation in tennis and golf, suggesting high potential for these offerings in future recreation planning.

Finally, the City of Shaker Heights conducted a benchmarking analysis focused on operating metrics, facilities, staffing, programming, and financial performance to better understand how its parks and recreation system compares with peer communities. The goal was to assess current performance, identify opportunities for improvement, and establish key performance indicators (KPIs) to guide future planning.

Seven comparable Midwest communities—Cleveland Heights (OH), Kirkwood (MO), Lakewood (OH), Mason (OH), Oak Park (IL), Oak Park (MI), and Reynoldsburg (OH)—were selected based on size, location, and similar socioeconomic characteristics.

Shaker Heights manages 139 acres of parkland across 11 parks, placing it in the middle range among peer cities, with a strong distribution of parks per capita. The City operates two indoor recreation facilities—ranking third in both size and availability per resident—and offers 27 outdoor amenities, consistent with peer averages. With a total operating budget of \$2.1 million, Shaker Heights ranks fifth in spending and exceeds the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) Park Metrics Database median for cost per acre. At the same time, recreation makes up 2.9% of the City's overall budget. The department is efficiently staffed, ranking fourth in terms of expenses per employee. It also recovers 55% of its program costs, earning \$1.1 million in revenue from \$2.0 million in expenses, fifth among comparison cities.

This step reaffirmed that Shaker Heights is a stable and well-performing parks and recreation system relative to its peers. Its strengths lie in facility distribution, capital investment, and efficient operations. While there is room for growth in park acreage and cost recovery, the benchmarking analysis provides a clear baseline for future planning. These findings should guide ongoing strategic decision-making and the development of measurable goals over time.

Community Engagement

Community engagement was a central component of the Shaker Heights Recreation Strategic Plan, ensuring the process was inclusive, transparent, and shaped by local voices. To gather input at key milestones, a variety of outreach methods—including public meetings, pop-up events, small group gatherings, online tools, and a dedicated project website—were used. The MKSK team, in partnership with City staff, provided materials and support to facilitate engagement at critical locations and throughout the planning timeline. City staff and stakeholders played an active role in promoting and hosting events. This comprehensive engagement approach ensured that community input was integrated into every stage of the plan, helping to shape a shared vision for the future of parks and recreation in Shaker Heights.

The Advisory Group played a vital role in shaping the Shaker Heights Recreation Strategic Plan by providing community-driven input throughout the planning process. Comprised of 19 residents selected through a City-led application process, the group represented a diverse cross-section of the community and acted as both advisors and ambassadors for the plan. Their contributions ensured that the final plan reflected a wide range of perspectives and community values.

Twelve stakeholder interviews were also conducted with groups representing local sports leagues, recreational facilities, civic organizations, and community members. These interviews provided insight into shared needs, challenges, and opportunities from various perspectives. Participants were asked to reflect on both group-specific and citywide recreation needs.

Stakeholders expressed a strong need for programming and spaces that better serve teens, seniors, and residents not engaged in organized sports. They emphasized the importance of facilities that reflect Shaker Heights' identity and make a positive impression on both residents and visitors. There was also a call for expanded space, improved recreational activity scheduling, and better maintenance of fields, equipment, and amenities. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for more seating and social areas in parks, updates to key City facilities like the Thornton Park pool and ice rink, and the importance of parks that offer a mix of passive recreation, pick-up play, and organized sports.

The Shaker Heights Recreation Strategic Plan employed a robust mix of online and in-person engagement tools to ensure broad community participation. These tools were designed to reach diverse audiences, gather meaningful input, and create multiple opportunities for residents to shape the future of parks and recreation in their community.

Online Engagement

An interactive project website served as the hub for public engagement, offering project updates, key dates, and tools for input. Shared through postcards, social media, email listservs, signage, and flyers, interactive features included:

- **Interactive Map:** Residents dropped pins to categorize park amenities under "Keep," "Update," or "Innovate."
- **Vision Board:** Community members shared ideas for the future of recreation and interacted with each other's input.
- **Fund It! Activity:** Participants allocated a virtual \$100 budget to prioritize recreation investments.
- **Social Media Questionnaires:** Simple polls conducted early in the process gathered quick input on park use and recreation gaps.

In-Person Engagement

Recognizing the importance of meeting residents where they are, City staff and the planning team hosted pop-up events across neighborhoods and project sites.

Two public meetings—offering both in-person and virtual options—were held at key stages of the planning process to share project progress and gather input through interactive exercises. Recorded virtual sessions were made available on the project website to extend access.

Together, these tools created a dynamic and inclusive engagement framework that informed the strategic plan with rich, community-driven feedback at each stage of the process.



Concept Plans

The concept plans were shaped by feedback gathered throughout the community engagement process. By involving a broad cross-section of Shaker Heights residents—both recreation users and non-users—the City developed a strategic, inclusive, and coordinated vision.

The proposed designs prioritize spaces that support community gathering, promote wellness, and meet diverse recreational and programmatic needs.

Hildana Park

The concept plan for Hildana Park provides another neighborhood-scale park that creates a space for passive recreation, open space for activities and programming, public art, and a plaza with seating for residents to relax and enjoy their surroundings.

Chelton Park

The Chelton Park concept plan reflects Moreland residents' vision for a neighborhood-scale park that meets their needs and priorities. Building on the Lee Road Action Plan, the design proposes expanding the park and creating a direct connection to Lee Road. The plan enhances the site with active recreation elements, including a basketball court and a flexible multipurpose field.

STJ Community Building Quadrant

The STJ site concept plan proposes a new community center that offers recreational programming for all ages. To create vibrant outdoor spaces and strengthen connections to the adjacent library, the plan includes a story walk and the relocated Readers Garden public art installation—features designed to promote learning, activity, and time spent on site.

Replacing the existing grass field with artificial turf will allow for expanded use during inclement weather and adaptable programming for a variety of sports and ages, as well as expanded access to the walking path.

Thornton Park

Two concept plans were developed for Thornton Park to explore a range of options for future recreational facilities. Concept Plan 1 mirrors Concept Plan 1 for the Shaker Heights Middle School Site. Concept 2 for each site are also paired. These include scenarios for a single-sheet or 1.5-sheet ice rink, upgrading the pool, moving the pool, removal of the existing rink, or repurposing the current facility for alternative recreational uses.

Recognizing the pool location as a valued community asset, Concept Plan 1 considers enhancements to strengthen its role as a central hub for recreation. Additional proposed features—such as a playground, sports courts, and a skate park—aim to expand recreational offerings and create a more vibrant, multi-use destination at Thornton Park.

Shaker Heights Middle School

The two concept plans for the Shaker Heights Middle School site were developed to reflect timing and site availability constraints.

The first concept envisions an outdoor-focused recreational campus, including amenities and a proposed closure of Fayette Road to strengthen connections with the nearby library.

The second concept features a new recreation center with indoor aquatics and an outdoor pool, creating a comprehensive hub with fields, courts, trails, a playground, and a dog park.

Although most of the site will remain unavailable until the middle school is decommissioned, both concepts include phased improvements that can be implemented over time.

Next Steps

The Recreation Strategic Plan, shaped through extensive community and stakeholder engagement, is a long-term framework to guide recreation enhancements. While the plan outlines priorities for each site, final decisions will be made by City Administration and City Council, balancing community vision with cost, timing, facility conditions, and funding realities.

Recognizing that full implementation will take time—potentially decades—the plan is designed to be flexible and responsive. Investments will be based on current conditions, site readiness, funding availability (including grants, partnerships, and sponsorships), and coordination with other City efforts. Equity and access will remain key considerations, especially in underserved areas and near schools.

Two immediate next steps have been identified in the plan to kickstart implementation. These include an updated conditions study for the mechanical systems at Thornton Park Ice Rink and launching Phase 2, a Recreation Operations & Implementation Plan aimed at outlining phasing, management, and funding strategies for the improvements outlined.

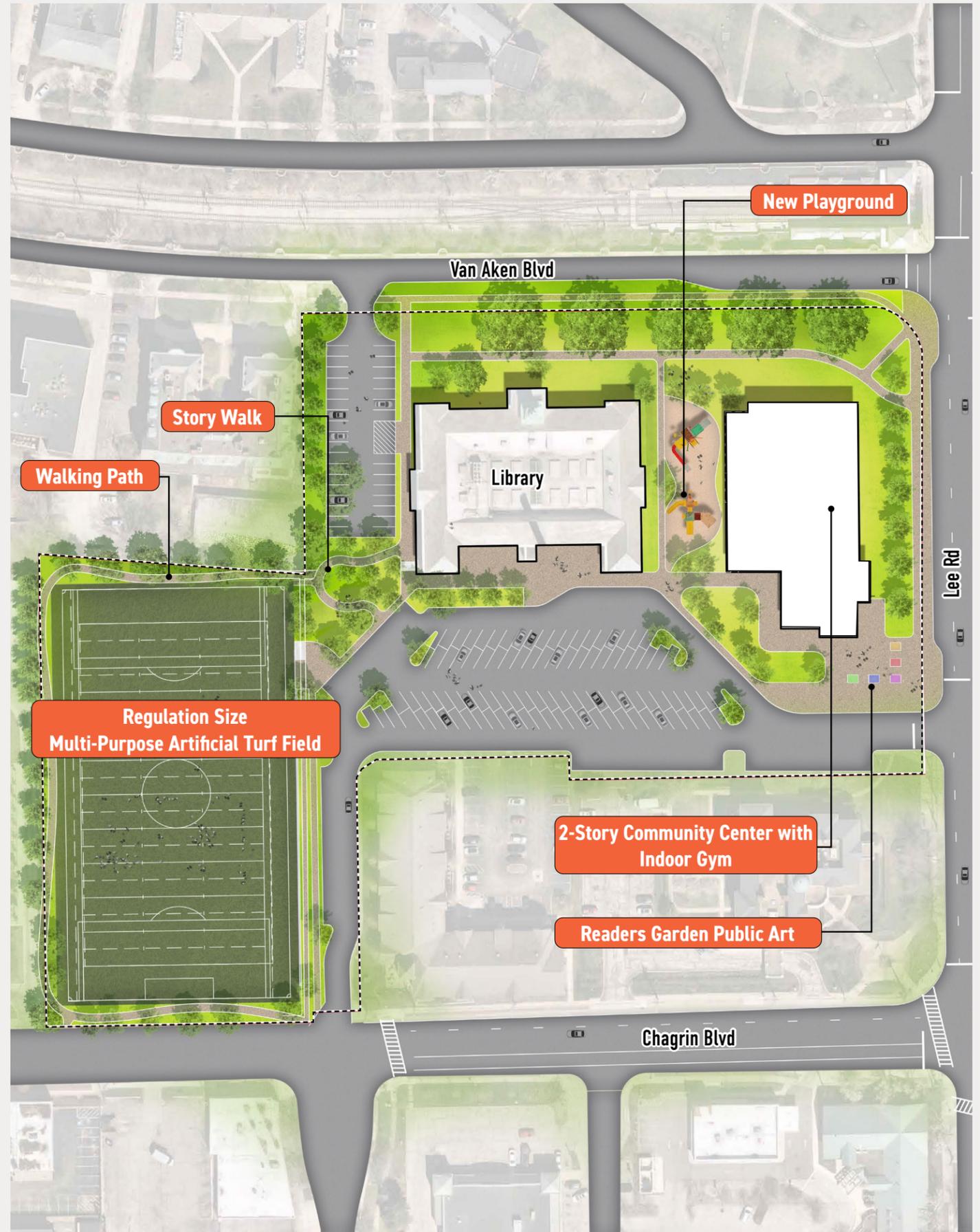
Four first actions and early wins are recommended. These comparatively smaller projects can be implemented relatively quickly and support the overall recommendations of the Recreation Strategic Plan.

- Chelton Park Basketball Court
- STJ Community Building Quadrant Turf Field
- Hildana Park Improvements
- Middle School Median Dog Park

To build momentum, the City will pursue these “first actions” and early win projects that are lower in cost, quicker to implement, and aligned with the plan goals. These will complement larger, long-term improvements and help demonstrate progress while a clear and community-informed pathway for enhancing recreation in Shaker Heights is established.



Chelton Park Concept Plan



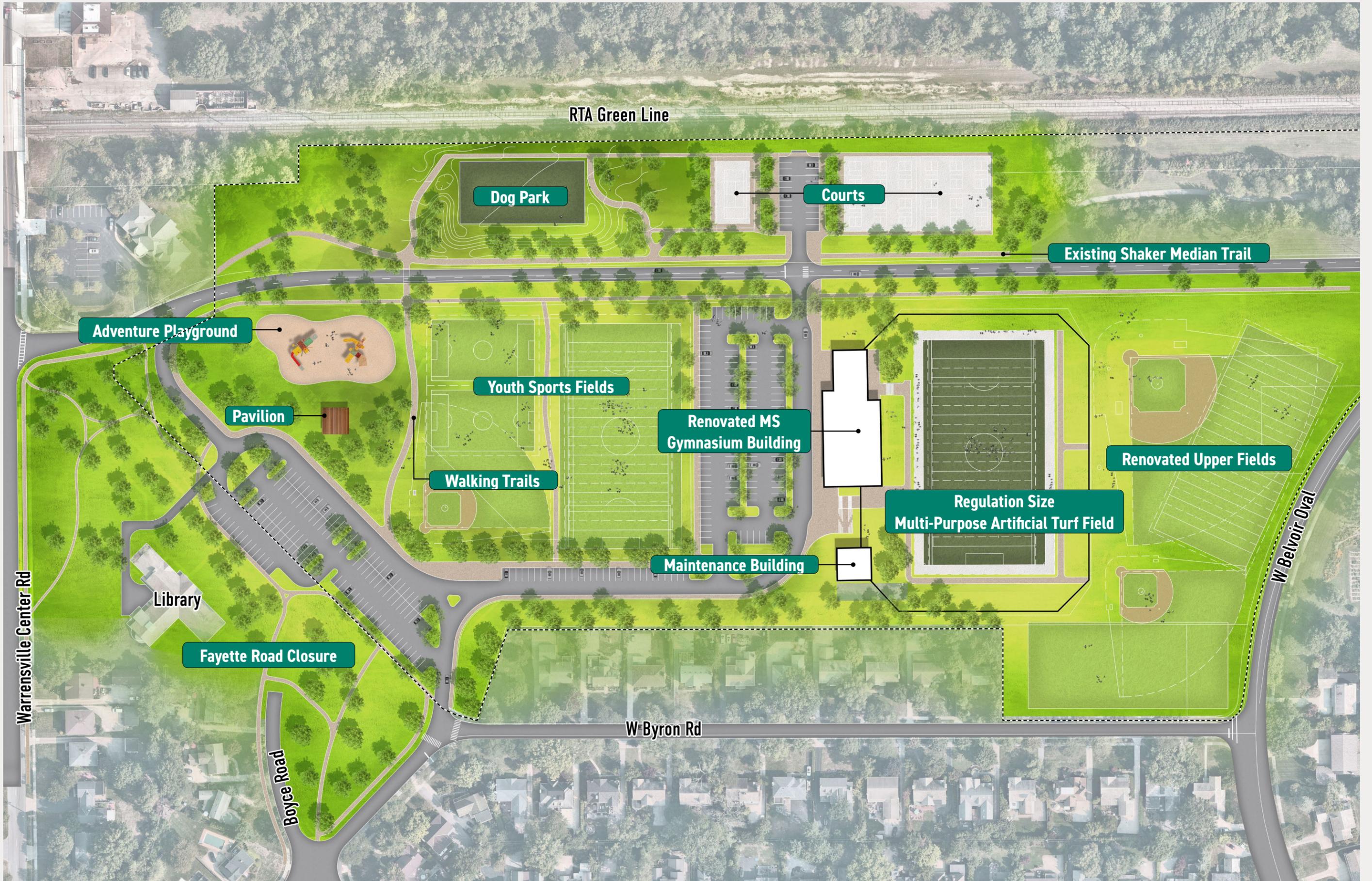
STJ Community Building Quadrant Concept Plan



Thornton Park Concept Plan 1



Thornton Park Concept Plan 2



RTA Green Line

Dog Park

Courts

Existing Shaker Median Trail

Adventure Playground

Pavilion

Youth Sports Fields

Renovated MS
Gymnasium Building

Walking Trails

Maintenance Building

Regulation Size
Multi-Purpose Artificial Turf Field

Renovated Upper Fields

Warrensville Center Rd

Library

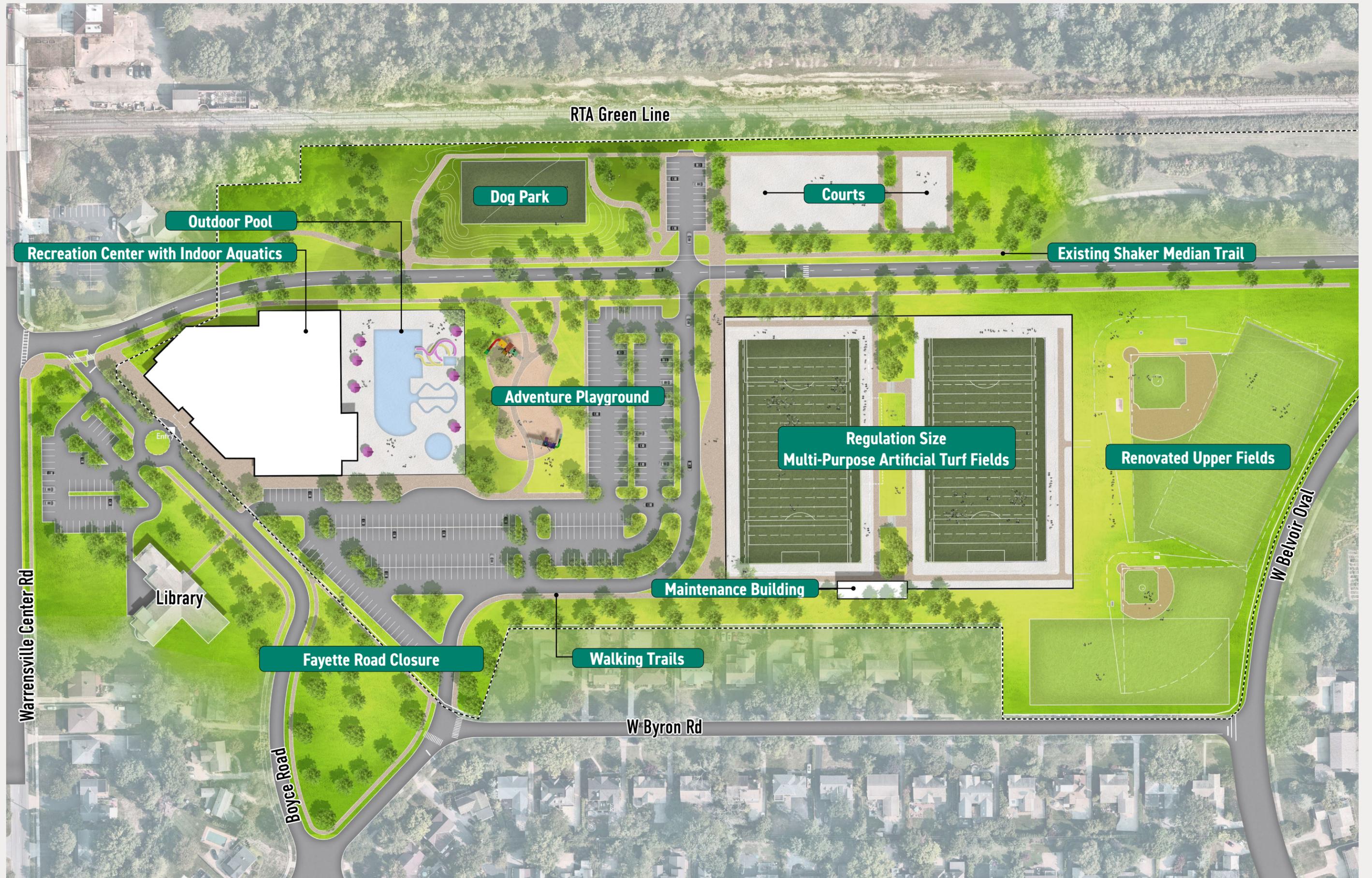
Fayette Road Closure

Boyce Road

W Byron Rd

W Belvoir Oval

Shaker Heights Middle School Concept Plan 1



RTA Green Line

Dog Park

Courts

Outdoor Pool

Recreation Center with Indoor Aquatics

Existing Shaker Median Trail

Adventure Playground

Regulation Size
Multi-Purpose Artificial Turf Fields

Renovated Upper Fields

Library

Maintenance Building

Fayette Road Closure

Walking Trails

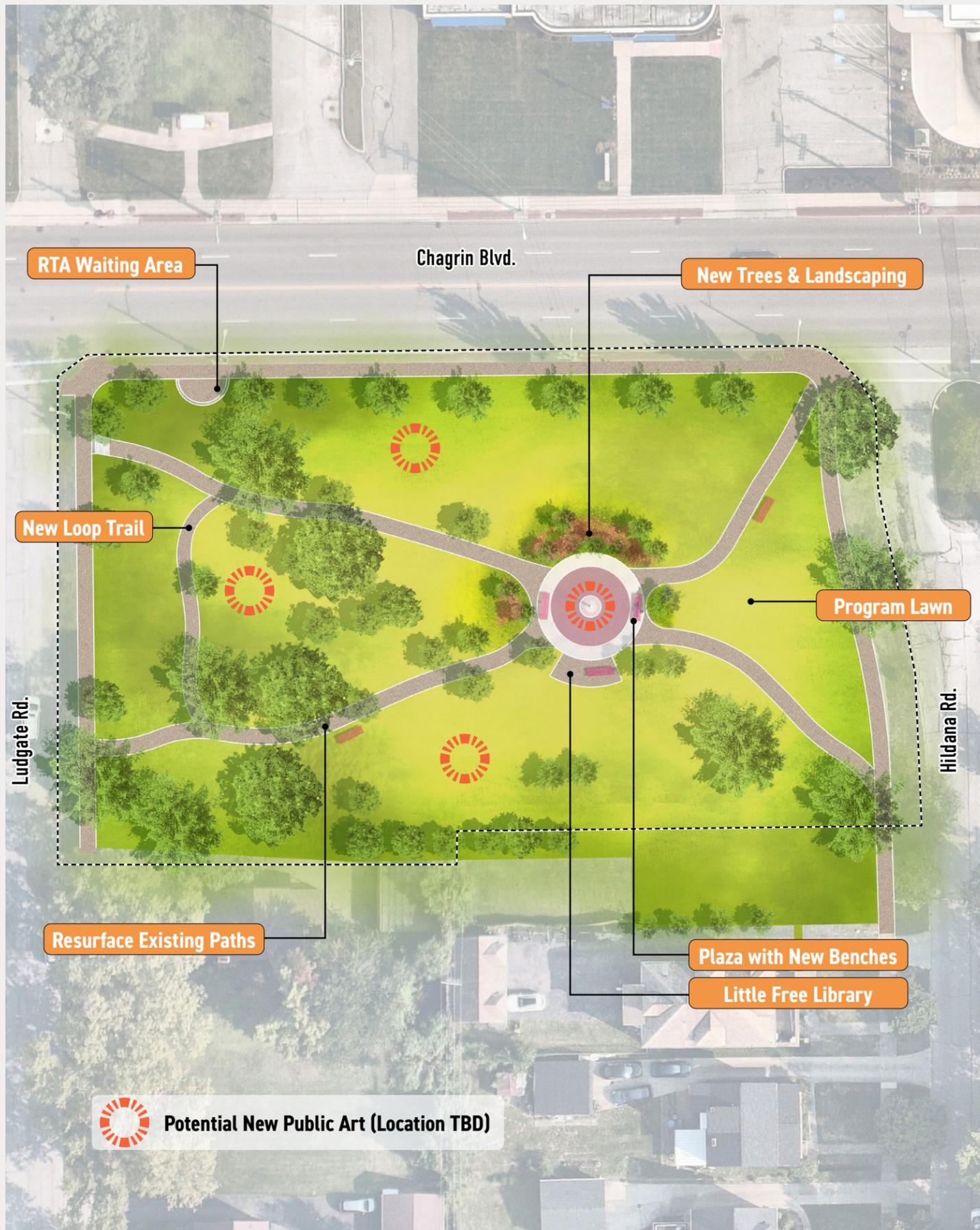
Warrensville Center Rd

Boyce Road

W Byron Rd

W Belvoir Oval

Shaker Heights Middle School Concept Plan 2



RTA Waiting Area

Chagrin Blvd.

New Trees & Landscaping

New Loop Trail

Program Lawn

Ludgate Rd.

Hildana Rd.

Resurface Existing Paths

Plaza with New Benches

Little Free Library

 Potential New Public Art (Location TBD)

Hildana Park Concept Plan

