**Stakeholder Interviews: Summary**  
Sunken Gardens Park Master Plan: August 2020

**Introduction**
Stakeholder interviews were conducted in August 2020 to expand public engagement in the master planning process. Interviews were conducted remotely using Teams, Zoom and conference calls. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes long, the same questions were posed to all interviewees, and all responses were documented by the consultant team. The results from the interviews have been consolidated and paraphrased, with some direct quotes.

**Questions**
1. What is your association or connection to Sunken Gardens Park?
2. What role does the park play in the lives of your members/neighbors/colleagues/city?
3. What is your vision for the park? How should the park evolve to serve residents and visitors?
4. What existing attributes of the park should be maintained or enhanced?
5. Are there any new elements that should be introduced to the park to better serve the neighborhood, community, city?

**Stakeholders**
1. Professor of Chicano Studies
2. Neighborhood Parish
3. Architect; Local Business Owner; Resident
4. Historic Denver
5. Golden Triangle Residents (2)
6. La Alma/Lincoln Park Residents (2)
7. Local Non-Profit Business Manager and Volunteer Coordinator
8. DPS Administrator
9. Non-Responsive: Event Permit Holder

**In addition, several city agencies were contacted to discuss Sunken Gardens Park**
- City Agency: DPR Resiliency Planner
- City Agency: Wastewater/Water Quality (2)
- City Agency: Landmarks
- City Agency: Forestry
- City Agency: La Alma Recreation Director
- City Agency: DPR Maintenance
- City Agency: DPR Downtown Parks Planner
- City Agency: DPR Recreation Directors (2)

**Overview**
Interviewees were very forthcoming with information pertaining to their own unique experiences in the park as well as their vision for future improvements. Generally, the stakeholders as a group cited the important role that the park has played in the history of the city and immediate neighborhoods, and the desire to ensure that the park continues to serve local residents, employees and visitors, including families and patients of Denver Health. Access to the park was consistently cited as a primary deterrent to more frequent use of the park. Open lawn areas, shade provided by the mature deciduous and evergreen trees were repeatedly discussed as unique park attributes. Most importantly, there was an overwhelming desire to ensure that park remains a safe and welcoming with significant opportunities for residents to enjoy the open, expansive and shady spaces. While many cited a potential shift in use patterns curing COVID, the same stakeholders commented that it was wonderful to see so many people in the park engaging in a variety of different activities.
Interview #1: Professor of Chicano Studies, Long Time Neighborhood Advocate

- The neighborhood has a deep connection to the school and the school has a deep connection to the park. The park became a haven where people could meet and develop relationships, play music, hang out; when the students left school, they could find friends and community in the park.

- The key to understanding Chicano neighborhoods is to understand the role parks play in the lives of the neighborhoods. The families spend entire days and weekends in the park.

- The social justice work that has been done at West High created a synergy that taught people that they can get involved…it’s a spiritual place Sunken Gardens. It’s a place where people felt empowered and they hang their hat.....doing their own thing at Sunken Gardens.

- There are people who have been involved in the community for a long time, who used to own property on the Metro Campus, and who were displaced due to eminent domain during the development of the Auraria Campus. Those people sent their kids to West High where they were not well educated and often ignored. This is what prompted the Blow Outs. Then there was organizing and activism and engagement, all of which occurred in the park in some form or another – all of these efforts were an attempt to try to heal the collected wounded spirit.

- There were marches from Metro to West High on Cesar Chavez Day. The Peace March ended at West High with people spilling into the park. “It’s a spiritual place Sunken Gardens. It’s a place where people felt empowered and could – and can - hang their hat.....doing their thing and doing it at Sunken Gardens.”

- The people make a park, not buildings - it’s their hearts and soul and what they bring to a space. It’s spiritual. It would be great to bring stages to the park, and performance space that would attract people to the park for poetry readings, performances. There should be space that people can count on having access to, and where there can be creative community events in partnership with the neighborhoods.

- The ambiance of the park is critical; its sunk and eye catchy and the treesare older and wonderful. The wading pool was beautiful - my relatives remember this. There needs to be inclusion from a multi-cultural and historical perspective that educates city residents and park visitors about the Hispanic Chicano ties to the park. It should be a place where people can bring music, poetry, and educate our children and make then proud of their heritage. There should be murals.

- There should be murals and park amenities for children – “families stay longer when there are things to do.” Develop an educational brochure about the park that reintroduces the park to city.
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Interview #2: Denver Inner City Parish (DICP)

Background: Denver Inner City Parish (DICP) was established in 1960 in response to the growing number of impoverished families living in Denver’s West Side neighborhood who were unable to meet their basic living needs. Since that time, DICP has stayed true to our mission of providing programs and services for lower-income families, and we have expanded our programs to include the entire Denver metro area. DICP focuses on areas of critical need in the community, specifically education and youth development, hunger relief, health and wellness, and community support. DICP serves Denver’s at-risk communities through programs that relieve suffering, promote self-sufficiency, enrich lives, and address obstacles associated with poverty.

- I am a Denver native and have used the park for about 26 years; I grew up using the park and attended neighborhood schools.

- The park plays an important role in the neighborhood and the city. It’s a West Denver staple. Being so close to Denver Health and West HS, it gets a lot of exposure, use by the schools and also by people working and visiting the hospital who take their kids there.

- New improvements to the park should include art, which is reflective of the community’s culture, and art is important.

- Create access for cyclists who are riding up and down the Cherry Creek bike path. Access is an issue especially with the high-speed traffic along Speer. Safety is an issue – the park is surrounded by busy streets such as 8th and Speer.

- Many areas of the park could be better used. Add elements to engage the children; the Boys and Girls Club is located close to the park. Add a space to house events that is inclusive of local residents – this would be used and tremendously popular.

- The name “Sunken Gardens” is important to keep. The terrain is important, and the open spaces allows for a variety of uses by a diverse community.

- The park has changed, which comes with the gentrification of the neighborhood – but there really has not been a whole lot of change in the physical attributes or offerings of the park.

- Improvements should include exercise areas and equipment, dedicated bike path for kids in the form of a mtn bike trail through the southern end of the park under the trees.

- Preserve the tree canopy – do not get rid of the trees.
Interview #3: Historic Denver

- I grew up in Denver - 1 mile from Sunken Gardens so always in my mind as a “Denver Place”. I have been involved in Parks/Parkways, chaired City Park Master Plan - one of City Beautiful parks. Sunken Gardens is a critical piece of City Beautiful Parks System.

- The Lincoln Park neighborhood includes homes belonging to leaders of the Chicano movement. For Sunken Gardens, context is not just the neighborhood, but more importantly the cultural history and events that occurred there, and this is what gives the park added meaning.

- There is a sense of connectivity here; the park, the West Campus, Speer Boulevard make the neighborhood feel connected to the bigger systems. Relationship between the school and park. Both Lincoln/La Alma Park and Sunken Gardens are safe spaces in the community, and there is a sense of community ownership in these spaces that allowed people to gather here, which doesn’t exist today except by perhaps West Campus students. And this is very different from other parks such as City Park. “Moments of collective action make people feel connected to the larger city by individuals”.

- Consider the relationship of the park to the larger network of city parks and historic parks; retaining the sense of connection to the larger park system could be reinforced by improvements to connectivity especially to the Cherry Creek bike path.

- Sunken Gardens needs to maintain a strong identity, especially by and for DPS students who consider the park a part of their daily life and take pride in the park as part of the school experience.

- Bring Chicano history to life. There should be creative components that reflect cultural the cultural heritage of the park and events that happened there. There are opportunities to layer the information in the park using existing features so that those important cultural meanings are reflected in the park. There are several places to introduce new elements in the park, and design of the elements should engage the West Campus students.

- Maintain existing landscape features and historic attributes as markers of the park’s longevity, the topography, the stepping down from the high school, the sunken landform and the open center. Keep some of the pieces - maybe they are used differently. Spatial qualities are important and create a sense of discovery. Are there opportunities to interject new by designs taking cues from the older pieces?

- The big trees should be protected. The vegetation frames the park and is important; evergreen trees are the frame and the deciduous trees are the foreground. There are important sight lines in the park. The vista to West High and from West High back to Downtown is important.

- The historic maintenance building offers opportunities for more active use, and the 5280 Loop would be great opportunity engage these structures. Are there opportunities to activate the existing structures by developing options for every day or periodic use of these existing structures?

- The winding meandering paths and trails are wonderful experiences but create wayfinding needs.

- Maintain original elements, restore and introduce. There are opportunities to retain elements and creative ways to reinterpret elements through layering. Ideally, you don’t relocate those important features.

- There is value in reintroducing water elements that are in keeping with current water conservation goals.
• It’s important to note that people are not always looking for more activation as evidenced in the City Park Master Plan process. People come to walk and experience the park and to be outdoors. We want to be in beautiful places and opportunities to be passive in a beautiful place.

• This process and this project should be construed as stewardship. Parks are shared assets and each generation needs to leave them in a condition for future generations to enjoy. How we treat those assets and the public spaces to retain the core qualities for future enjoyment?

• More significant investment will be required in the future if things are neglected now. Shared spaces that are maintained are important components to the Denver Identity, being stewards and maintenance of these spaces are essential for the public good.
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Interview #4: Golden Triangle Resident

- It’s a neighborhood park, but COVID I rarely spent time there. Now I see people doing yoga, people with dogs. Prior to COVID, I walked through the park to other destinations.

- There is NO CONNECTIVITY to park. You cannot get there from here. The park is really not that far and just a few blocks away. This is an opportunity to improve connectivity which will also improve connections and unite our neighborhoods.

- There is a changing demographic. There are new people, younger people and almost everyone has a dog.

- My vision is not that grand, but nicely that the park is thoughtfully improved and maintained. Enhance the playground, which would ensure activation by kids and families. The park is a place of respite. Comfortable picnic tables, benches with dividers would be a good addition. I think the park is too small for formal sports programming.

- The base of the pavilion presents interesting possibility and acts as a stage, which could be used for neighborhood gatherings, and small neighborhood organizations.

- Small gardens would be nice but should be mindful of xeriscaping and take advantage of local flora that is meant to grow where we are.

- The sidewalks need to be maintained, especially where the roots of the trees have pushed up the concrete and asphalt, and this is critical to ensuring that the park has an appearance of being well-cared for and cherished.

- Dog Park: I don’t want to give up space for a dog park but might this make sense. It’s a huge need.

- The trees are one of the most important parts of the park. I would preserve every tree that is living there.

- One of my primary recommendations would be a foot bridge over Cherry Creek, but a pedestrian bridge that would span from the sidewalk on the east Speer and go OVER both North and Southbound Speer and the Creek over the park would be ideal.
Interview #5: La Alma/Lincoln Resident – Born and Raised

- Grew up two blocks away and spent a lot of time at the Cope Boys and Girls Club. Sunken Gardens has always been an important space for us.

- I did not use the park that much when I was a student at West - the park was not welcoming. There was grass...and that was it. Some kids played soccer, but there weren't benches across the street from the school.

- What is missing? Flowers, and things that are welcoming like new benches and tables. The ones that are there are old, they've been there forever. Add flowers, a garden or a mural that incorporates the history of the place and neighborhood. Do something with color or on the ground or on the wall at the basketball court...the park needs more color.

- La Alma park has a big mural that instantly connects me to the place; the mural is welcoming. There is nothing in Sunken Gardens that creates a cultural connection. There is nothing in the park that speaks to where I grew up or my cultural heritage.

- Interpretive signage with photographs should be installed that educates park users about the history of the people and the neighborhood, not just the historic features that were there a long time ago.
Interview #6: Golden Triangle Resident

- I live nearby and visit the park frequently with my family to walk our dog.

- The Golden Triangle lacks a neighborhood park, and I love the big open space and hope that is retained. The park offers a balance of open space and intimate areas where you sit at the tables or sit on the grass. But I spend significant time at Sloan’s Lake and Washington Park which offers amenities that I am seeking in a neighborhood park.

- Current park users are comprised of families, Empty Nesters and Millennials – there are not a lot of requests for more active components.

- I would love to see the frame of the pool built up a bit more...still like to see grass in the middle but want the frame elevated so people could sit on it. I would love to see something where the pavilion was that maintains the scale and perhaps nods to the historic look and feel of the original element, which could used by neighborhood groups and for events.

- There should be interpretive signage describing the evolution of the park, including the Chicano activism. This would be an important thing to incorporate in the park.

- There is no art in this park and there should be: murals, sculpture. Consider incorporating artistic elements into the bike racks and playground equipment that tips its hat to the cultural heritage of the community. “There should be random cool art stuff.” The basketball court could have a mural similar to La Alma/Lincoln Park, which would add color. The playground looks old and tired. The playgrounds in Ruby Hill and Barnum include whimsical elements serve two purposes: a place to play and public art opportunities. The shelter is great at the playground and the tables are lovely.

- There are options for new flower gardens: the northern tip and the old slot car course. upper triangle would be nice for gardens...Slot car place would be great for gardens. The old stone gazebo reminds me what you see National Parks – it’s a nice element on the corner with good visibility.

- The trails are great but need to be repaved and made accessible. There are too many tripping hazards.

- The stairways from Speer into the park are intriguing and should be reconnected to the trails. If the stairs are going to be retained, they should be cleaned up and perhaps considered as a potential location for public art.

- The maintenance shed is ripe for opportunity; get the neighborhood together and engage the community in the restoration or upgrade of this element. Perhaps a snack stand with seating that would activate this stretch of the park and integrated with the introduction of the 5280 Loop Trail that will ultimately bring people from all over Denver into the park.
Interview #7: La Alma/Lincoln Resident – Born and Raised

- I grew up at 6th and Elati and have a very strong connection to Sunken Gardens. I have very fond childhood memories of the park, but this park has been abandoned and it would be great if it could now come full circle and evolve into a more useful, accessible and celebrated space. “Thank you for the opportunity to give my perspective it is a very dear part of my life.”

- It’s not a beautiful park, but when you know of the history, it is beautiful. When you are at West, it is beautiful. There are attributes that make it beautiful. There is a duality that this is the inner city of Denver and Sunken Gardens and the neighborhoods are the roses that blossomed. There are urban legends and the public needs to be educated about it. The neighborhood is rich with history; we should pay homage to that. The park has been neglected and forgotten. There is little maintenance there.

- This park presents an opportunity to bridge the gap and improve equity between our homeless and our housed. This is the heart of Denver, and this is an opportunity to create a welcoming place where the homeless community could be assured of periodic access to basic needs such as showers and laundry. The park should serve all members of our communities.

- “I love the shape of the park, the bones of it, the pavilion and the concrete that peeks out of the grass. It is like a piece of history.” The historic remnants should be kept and acknowledges and inform the master plan.

- I love that the park is sunken, but there is no handicap access that is problematic.

- I think people don’t know the history of this. People don’t even know the park is there. I’ve been there for kickball league and family photos and it’s cool to tell people about the history. Have photos near the old structures.

- Incorporate the old with the new. There should be a new pavilion. The obvious addition would be a garden, a community-oriented garden where you are introducing culture, harvesting the marigolds, get community involved and maybe even generate income. This is another opportunity to give back – and providing food that is a basic human right. These are community-based programs that are geared towards the homeless and displaced and create resources in the right locations – Sunken Gardens could play a prominent role in that.


- On the corner on 8th, there used to be a community garden and that is what made me think of that...there used to be one and I would walk by and look at the plots. Maybe just ½ an acre....if I would wish for anything. Teaching community agriculture and have access to a community plot. Its important for people to learn how to grow food.

- I hope this has helped and excited to see what will come of this. I’m a mother now and I am finding myself having hard conversations with my daughter and what she can hold in her heart. I was 16 when we got displaced. It’s traumatizing and cyclical. This gives me a little piece of myself back and it’s moving - because there are so many of us that do not have a voice and this is an opportunity to have a very hopeful conversation so thank you all for this work.
Interview #8: Historian

- May Dad was arrested at West High Walkouts. The was and is an important part of the school. Denver has terrible record of acknowledging the past, and the Walkouts are important to our movement.

- Linking La Alma Park to this Park would be wonderful, and would be healing process to the La Alma neighborhood would be so meaningful to the community, and I would like to see an acknowledgement of both the park’s rich history and the important cultural events that occurred there.

- A monument that recognizes historical events would be amazing. The concept of the reflection pool, to have water back in the park would be healing. If the community could be part of the story, the community would feel that and be amazing, and if the community can feel part of this transformation, it would be very powerful and meaningful. Yes, you are having interviews and you have the Advisory Community, but if the residents and community could be more visible in this transformation, that would be great - the community has something to contribute. If the community can actively participate, then that gives them ownership and they will become stewards of these spaces, they become protective and take care of these spaces.

- Students should know they have a space there. The park has been abandoned. When a park becomes very manicured, it suddenly becomes - for people of color - off limits. When historic and original elements are removed, people of color interpret this gesture as neglect, and that the city no longer cares anymore, and that because people of color have moved in, their parks and those spaces can be neglected. Curtis Park, La Alma Park were abandoned and were covered with graffiti - it’s very symbolic. It’s as if the City is saying we don’t care about this park, you can have it.

- Public art in this park should not be another abstract sculpture that says nothing about the community, but be comprised of art where the students can see their own faces and their cultural heritage reflected in the art.

- The idea of linking Sunken Gardens to other parks is a huge step forward and allows the people to like they are not closed in and there are paths and connections to other places and spaces in the city and to other neighborhoods. Again, it would be great to include the community in the planning, so they know this is for them.

- For many Lincoln/La Alma residents, it is frustrating to see what is happening at La Alma - when they constructed a skateboard ramp right in front of the mural. This is a thoughtless gesture by the city and sends a very clear message that these spaces and this art is unimportant. When these kinds of improvements are located directly in front of elements that are intended to generate pride, the community once again feels shuttered and disengaged.
Interview #9: Architect, Local Business Owner, Resident

- I have lived and worked in Golden Triangle for over 10 years, and I rarely visit the park due to access: you have to cross Speer, the sidewalks are narrow, the traffic volumes and speeds are not conducive to promoting access to this neighborhood park.

- Our employees used to park on Elati Street because it was free. Neighbors exercise their dogs in the park.

- The lack of connectivity to the park resulted in missed opportunities during prior planning efforts.

- The historic pedestrian bridge should be resurrected. Speer is the biggest challenge to access – its like trying to cross Broadway twice – because you have to cross both the northbound and southbound lanes of Speer. The connection from the park to Cherry Creek should be celebrated and is also a missed opportunity, and reintroducing a waterway in the same location as the Historic DeBoer water feature would both celebrate water and create a connection between the park and Cherry Creek. There are no other parks in Denver that front Cherry Creek like this one does.

- The park is more passive than active.

- An ice-skating rink would be a great amenity.

- The pavilion should be celebrated and enhanced in a way that encourages use by West students.

- The park could benefit from partnerships with Denver Health and other organizations. Activation of a park is important in ensuring a clean and safe park. Partnerships are a critical component in master planning or parks that embraces the park and the spaces in the park and create a formal framework for events so it’s not just a visual setting, but also an active setting for programs. This increases the likelihood that others will take ownership in the park because they are involved in the actual programming of the spaces.

- The master plan should allow for flexibility and adaptability. People’s needs change. A master plan is a vision, and funding will determine implementation piece by piece. You need quick victories that can be done quickly, low cost and then big ideas – as Mayor Speer said, “You give while you live.” Encourage these partners to donate to these significant opportunities – and things could happen quickly w/out having to go back to a bond.

- Increased housing density has not resulted in increased pedestrian activity. “Speer should be a zipper pulling the neighborhoods together, not dividing the neighborhoods.” This park is an opportunity for a more active uses and recreation. It’s a wonderful, missed opportunity. This park, Speer, and Cherry Creek should be uniting our neighborhoods. But Speer and 8th Avenue are too fast, too auto oriented. The city needs to figure out how to get over them or around them to create a seamless connection.
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Interview #10: Director, Non-Profit Business

- Manager and Volunteer Coordinator for Maxfund Animal Adoption Center, 2.5 blocks from Sunken Gardens. Maxfund has 20 employees at the shelter and 15 at the vet clinic. Pre-COVID they had about 100 dogs on average and 20-25 volunteers daily.

- The park is used heavily by Maxfund volunteers who use the park as a place to walk the dogs. Volunteers walk dogs in 20-30-minute shifts from 6:15am to 6:00pm and use the park because of the shade. Also, because of the unpredictable nature of shelter dogs, they aren’t allowed to take them to a dog park – so the park serves as a nice place for them to be able to go. Most volunteers who walk the dogs are in their 20s, 30s, or 40s. Employees say they rarely use the park – but think they should go over there for lunch more often.

- The park needs more places to sit other than the grass for people taking lunch breaks from work

- The park needs dog poop stations to dispose of waste and creates a potential partnership opportunity with Maxfund volunteers and local residents.

- The trees and the shade they provide are critical elements of the park.

- The “sunken” aspect of the park makes the park unique.

- It would be nice to have more walking paths especially in front of the West Campus.
Interview #11: Denver Public Schools – West Campus

- I am a school administrator in one of the schools located on West Campus.

- The park is used consistently for lunch time, students use the basketball court. Other DPS schools such as Compassion Road, GALS, DCIS use the spaces for outdoor coordinated outdoor activities, as outdoor classrooms, for school celebrations and festivals.

- There are challenges in coordination between the city and DPS. On our campus there are both Middle School and High School programs, so access to and utilization of the park is critical. At times, we have to take kids to park because we don’t even have enough space for our students. It’s very busy campus. We understand that the park is not an expansion of campus, and utilization of the park requires additional hurdles, and it takes time to figure things out. Often we don’t get the information we need to avoid conflicts in use and this is discouraging, so we are discouraged from being out there. The relationship could be strengthened.

- We have been requesting pedestrian safety and traffic calming improvements for years. We need crosswalks on Elati. It’s unsafe in its present configuration. There is no ADA compliant access into the park from the entrance to West Campus. The parking regulations along Elati are inconsistent and not enforced. There are employees from Golden Triangle who park along Elati all day because it’s free and/or there is no enforcement.

- The park is very important to our school and we want to maintain it as a beautiful place. There are safety concerns associated with drug use and the homeless which we need to take into account when we use the park.

- The students would love and benefit from additional recreation programming. The kids take turns using the half court. A full-size court or series of half courts (basketball) would be great. Our gym is in use all day, every day. Our volleyball teams practice in the parking lot. If there was a safer, shaded dedicated space for learning, we would use that. Kids seek out the picnic tables. More shade would be great. More seating would be great.

- Off leash dog use does not complement what we use the park for and there are issues and conflicts. The park is like one big off leash dog park and this is a problem for our sports groups. We worry about this.

- Because of the role West played in the Blowouts, we’d love to have an art installation commemorating this event in the park.

- There are old murals in West dating back to 1924. West has a mural club. There is a huge need for us to have color and public art to express our values and our pride, and at the same time and educate others...we need art for that purpose to. The kids love being part of arts projects.