



Left & Right: Local Festival, 2016
Photo Credit: RaleighNC.gov

Dorothea Dix Park: A Park with a City in It

By Caroline Lindquist

Sitting less than a mile from the main street of downtown Raleigh, North Carolina is a 308-acre piece of land that is undergoing a transformation into America's next great urban park. The rare opportunity to have an expansive green space on land in the heart of one of the nation's [fastest growing cities](#) has led some planners and landscape architects to call the creation of [Dorothea Dix Park](#) the most important and exciting urban park project in America today.

How was this land saved for so long from private development? For 150 years, the land was the

site of the State Mental Health Hospital, named Dorothea Dix Hospital. For the 150 years prior to the hospital, the land was a plantation. In the early 2000s, the State of North Carolina determined they would close the hospital, as trends in mental health services had shifted away from centralized care. Multiple community groups and local business leaders urged the city to seize this opportunity and buy the land for public space. In 2015, the City of Raleigh, with the support of the community, [purchased the 308 acres](#) from the State for \$52M with the intent of turning the land into a

destination park.

Dorothea Dix Mental Health Hospital functioned as almost a city within a city. It had its own working farm, power plant, water source, woodworking shop, a playground and mini neighborhoods where doctors, nurses, and their families lived. At its maximum, the hospital property stretched westward 2,000 acres. The self-sufficiency of the property meant that the land and those who occupied it were in many ways isolated from the rest of the city. The stigma that surrounded the mental health hospital only furthered

that perception. Neighbors of the hospital property include North Carolina's Central Prison, the Governor Morehead School for the Blind, and formerly included an orphanage, a co-location of marginalized people of society in that time. Now, city is working to transform the site into a welcoming central gathering space for all.

Dix Park planners knew that the first steps of public engagement needed to focus on informing the community about the site's history and opening up this little-known space to all of Raleigh. To capture the true potential of the project, the city needed to foster community ownership of the new park land. One strategy that planners used was activating the site with creative park programming. In 2016, at the one-year anniversary of the property purchase, the city in partnership with the newly-formed Dorothea Dix Park

Conservancy, held an enormous festival with performances by local musicians, food trucks, a Ferris wheel, art installations, and family activities on what was once a pasture for the hospital



farm's cows. Although that July day was the hottest day of the summer, the festival drew 28,000 visitors. There was clearly a public yearning for a communal green space. Park planning staff began offering hundreds of public walking history tours to further introduce the community to the space. They also visited countless community groups to

give presentations on the park's past, present, and future.

In 2017, the City of Raleigh hired Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates to create a master plan for Dorothea Dix Park with a bold vision. During the two-year master planning process, city staff began what would become the city's largest public engagement outreach process in Raleigh's history. Dix Park planners offered experience-based engagement opportunities at the park to supplement public meetings and draw a more diverse crowd. At park events, planners gathered ideas from the public and listened to what people wanted the park to become.

In February 2019, the [Dorothea Dix Park Master Plan](#), shaped by feedback from over 65,000 participants, was completed and unanimously adopted by Raleigh City Council. Three Park Principles



Dreamville Festival, 2019
Photo Credit: RaleighNC.gov



Sunflower Fields at Dorothea Dix Park in Raleigh
Photo Credit: visitraleigh.com



of the master plan provide a continued guide for transforming this park with a complex past into the cultural heart of the city: (1) Open Up and Connect; (2) Build from What is There; (3) Offer Something for Everyone. While the full vision set forth by the master plan will not be completed for decades, the principles that guide it can be and are being implemented in the park today.

The Dix Park Team, comprised of city park planners, park maintenance staff, and the Dix Park Conservancy, has begun “Open[ing] Up and Connect[ing]” the site by tearing down a ten-foot tall fence that separated one edge of the property from a nearby neighborhood. The team has begun “Build[ing] from What is There” by using five acres of the unused capped landfill that was covered in weeds to plant

[thousands of sunflowers](#) for park-goers to enjoy. Lastly, the team has hosted a wide range of events to activate the green space and “Offer Something for Everyone”— from sunrise yoga on the summer solstice to a 40,000-person [hip-hop music festival](#). Overall, these continued efforts are shaping this separated space for some to a place of belonging for all.

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