

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

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Proposed Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield

Historic District

Final Report

8550 Chippewa Street



(Photo: Josh Lipnik, Midwest Modern)



By a resolution dated January 7, 2020, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board, a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Historic District in accordance with Chapter 21 of the 2019 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Historic District consists of a single contributing building, the playfield located at 8550 Chippewa Street, and the Higginbotham School playfield, approximately nine miles northwest of downtown. It is situated on approximately twelve and two-fifths acres of land just two blocks south of Eight Mile Road, the city's northern boundary, in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood. The Johnson Recreation Center is oriented to the south facing Chippewa Street and the Joe Louis Playfield occupies ten acres of land to the north from the Johnson Recreation Center to Norfolk Street. The building is currently vacant and under new ownership, the University of Detroit Jesuit High School, although the playfield remains in active use by the surrounding community.

BOUNDARIES

The boundaries of the proposed Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Historic District, outlined in heavy black on the attached map, are as follows:

On the north, the centerline of Norfolk Street;

On the east, the centerline of Cherrylawn Street;

On the south; the centerline of Chippewa Street; and

On the west, the centerline of Indiana Street, thence southerly along said centerline to the southern line of part of lot 274 of the Detroyal Gardens Subdivision, Liber 35, Page 77, Wayne County Records, thence easterly to the western line of part of the vacated alley east of the vacated Wisconsin Street, thence southerly along said line.



[Legal description: Beginning at the southeast corner of lot 531 of “Detroyal Gardens Subdivision No. 1” as recorded in Liber 2, Page 27 of Plats, Wayne County Records, thence S 89D 58M 00S W 519.73 ft. along the north line of Chippewa Avenue, 50ft. wide, thence N 00D 00M 24S E 427.78 ft., thence S 89D 58M 00S W 324.33 ft. to the east line of Indiana Street, 50 ft. wide, thence N 00D 00M 24S E 377.09 ft. to the south line of Norfolk Street, 50 ft. wide, thence N 89D 59M 54S E 844.91 ft., to the west line of Cherrylawn Street, 50 ft. wide, thence S 00D 04M 03S W 804.40 ft. to the point of beginning. Boundaries also include the west half of Cherrylawn Street adjacent, the north half of Chippewa Street adjacent, the east half of Indiana Street adjacent, and the south half of Norfolk Street adjacent. (Legal description: N CHIPPEWA AVE 531 THRU 550 DETROYAL GARDENS SUB NO 1 L42 P27 PLATS, W C R 16/365; ALL 21 THRU 40 83 THRU 102 143 THRU 151 216 THRU 224 265 THRU 273 PART OF 274 215 AND 152 THRU 162 DETROYAL GARDENS SUB L35 P77 PLATS, W C R 16/364; ALSO VAC OHIO AVE VAC WISCONSIN AVE AND VAC ALLEYS ADJ). Commonly known as 8550 Chippewa.]

Boundary Justification

The boundaries described above include the entire parcel historically associated with the Johnson Recreation Center, the Joe Louis Playfield, and the Higginbotham School playfield. The community used both the Joe Louis Playfield (from 1946 to the present) as well as the adjacent Higginbotham School playfield (1926 to the present) as recreation space.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield are significant under National Register **Criteria A** at the local level, for their role in Community Planning and Development, Entertainment/Recreation, Ethnic Heritage: Black, and Social History: Civil Rights. The influence of national events and federal policy on community growth and segregationist policies is specifically reflected in the playfield and recreation center’s creation. The Johnson Recreation Center is a representative example of the on-going segregation of public accommodations that restricted the civil rights of African Americans in Detroit in the 20th century. The Johnson Recreation Center also meets National Register **Criteria C** at the local level as a very good example of 1970s design aesthetic and the Organic Style in Detroit. The Organic Style has also been identified as an example of the “Late Modern Style” and the Johnson Recreation Center is one of a only few Organic style structures in Detroit. The Johnson Recreation Center also meets **Criteria G** as a property that has achieved significance in Detroit within the past fifty years. In the context of the Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Historic District, the Johnson Recreation Center is an expression of the district’s growth and expansion. The Johnson Recreation Center reflects a continuation of the efforts that have taken place to create significant social and recreational space for the people of the Eight Mile-Wyoming area of Detroit and is of exceptional significance.

Period of Significance

The period of significance, **1926-1979**, reflects the construction period of Higginbotham School, the Johnson Recreation Center, and Joe Louis Playfield. Additionally it includes the years that

federal policies influenced the construction of the Johnson Recreation Center; specifically the United States Department of Commerce under Title I of the Public Works Employment Act of 1976. This period of significance includes the construction of the Johnson Recreation Center and the efforts that have taken place to create significant social and recreational space for the people of the Eight Mile/Wyoming area of Detroit.

HISTORY

Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield were built at the northern outskirts of the city of Detroit during a period of enormous growth in area, reaching 139 square miles through annexations completed in 1926 and population, topping 1.5 million residents as recorded in the 1930 census. This growth was the result of industrial expansion at the major automotive plants such as the the Packard Plant in 1903, the Dodge Main Plant in 1911, and the Highland Park Ford Plant in 1914, leading to the explosion of the automobile industry with which Detroit became so much identified. The opportunity for jobs spurred an estimated 1.6 million southern African Americans to migrate north in the first Great Migration, and Detroit was the destination for many. According to the *20th Century Civil Rights in Detroit Survey*;

Detroit's black population stood at just under 6,000 in 1910. By 1920 it had increased over 611% to 40,828. The Detroit Urban League estimated that in 1920 alone an average of 1,000 black migrants arrived in Detroit each week, causing the city to "experience the largest relative growth in African American population of all the large industrial cities" in AmericaThe African American population doubled from 40,838 to 81,831 between 1921 and 1925. (Quinn Evans, 2019)

The Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood is a historically professional and working-class African American neighborhood that was settled in the early 1920s by a small group of African Americans who migrated to Detroit and settled on this former farmland, originally part of Greenfield Township. Restrictive covenants that prohibited settlement of African Americans to White neighborhoods did not exist in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area because of its remote location. This was one of the few areas near Detroit that was open to sale to African Americans. The first subdivision was called the "Garden Homes Subdivision." The City of Detroit annexed the area in 1925, and William Higginbotham School (8730 Chippewa Street) opened as a Detroit Public School in 1927, likely instigating further development of housing in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area. African American settlement occurred on both the north side of Eight Mile Road (in today's Royal Oak Township) and to the south in what is now the Detroit side.¹ The Detroit side of the African American settlement encompassed the area from Eight Mile Road south to Pembroke Street, (the *de facto*² segregation line) fourteen blocks east and west between Mendota and Woodingham Streets thus covering a forty-two-block area.

African Americans in Detroit faced discrimination in most every aspect of life in the twentieth-century. The book *Detroit's Birwood Wall* describes the barriers to public accommodations such as theaters, restaurants, public parks, swimming facilities, and hotels in Detroit in the early

¹ Both sides of Eight Mile Road were lined with businesses used by the African American community.

² *De facto* means a practice that exists in reality, even though the practice is not officially recognized by laws.

twentieth century. Working to change these discriminatory practices was the Detroit Urban League, an affiliate of the National Urban League. Today it is known as the Urban League of Detroit and Southeastern Michigan (ULDSEM); it was established in 1916 by John Dancy, who served as its director for 42 years. The Detroit Urban League was a city-wide organization that responded to the changing needs of African American Detroiters by developing programs and services to help and improve their lives. In the early 1920's, the Detroit Urban League staff met the incoming trains of African Americans migrating from the South to the North. The Urban League staff assisted these individuals with housing, education, employment, and access to adequate health care facilities. The first board president of the Detroit Urban League (DUL), Henry G. Stevens, a philanthropist, purchased a great deal of land in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area. Stevens sold the land to real estate developers who then subdivided the land and sold it to African American families. The DUL initiated the effort to provide land to African Americans and enabled homeownership when it simply was not an option for them in most of Detroit. Today the ULDSEM owns and operates two facilities in Detroit: Albert Kahn's historic residence located at 208 Mack Avenue, and an office at 15770 James Couzens Freeway.

When the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood was developing in the 1920s, assistance from the Detroit Urban League (DUL) was difficult to obtain due to the long distance from the downtown office in the days before the development of expressways. The large African American community in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood desired the organizational support of the Detroit Urban League. In 1937 a west-side affiliate DUL opened a facility in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood (at 20435 Northlawn) and the west-side DUL staff established programs such as home and garden clubs, events, and visits to Detroit's cultural institutions. The dedication ceremony of the west-side DUL was attended by the world boxing heavyweight champion, Detroit resident, Joe Louis.

Segregation and Recreation in Detroit

The *de facto* segregation color lines that existed in Detroit had a great effect on the Detroit African American community's access to recreational facilities, and the practice of segregated recreation in Detroit limited opportunities for African Americans. There were well-known color lines in Detroit that African Americans were discouraged from crossing; these included the west side of Woodward Avenue and the north side of Tireman Boulevard. The color lines in Detroit limited the recreation sites available to African American Detroiters in the twentieth century. There were some recreation sites in Detroit that were open to the city's African American residents: the Brewster-Wheeler Recreation Center (1917, 1929 addition), St. Cecelia Gym (1922, 1967 renovation), Kronk Recreation (1921, demolished in 2017), and the St. Antoine YMCA (1924, demolished 1964), and the Lucy Thurman YWCA (1932, demolished 1998). Institutions such as churches also provided recreation facilities and gyms for their neighborhoods such as the St. Cecelia gym on the west side. These facilities were many miles away from the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood, and were not practical for residents to travel to for recreation.

The City of Detroit Department of Parks and Recreation was established in 1940 and it set standards for recreation areas in Detroit without stating a regard to race. The department authored a justification for the recreational area (the future Joe Louis Playfield) at the Eight Mile-Wyoming area:

“This area will be a combined playfield, playground and neighborhood park. Standards for recreation areas adopted by Parks and Recreation Commission and City Plan Commission on October 11, 1945 call for a playground within one-quarter to one-half mile radius of every home. Children should not cross major thoroughfares. Standards call for playfields within one mile of every home.”³

In the 1940s the Parks and Recreation department expanded the total acreage of Detroit parks from 4,163 acres to 5,736 acres including a total of 170 new parks.⁴ There is no record of protests to end the segregation of recreational facilities in Detroit, although ending discrimination in public accommodations was an important issue for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, the Detroit Branch of the NAACP organized sit-ins, demonstrations, and strikes to call attention to discriminatory practices at public and private entities.

Birdhurst Community Center

The first recreation and community center in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood was in the adaptive reuse of a former elementary school, Birdhurst School at 20445 Woodingham Street (no longer extant). Birdhurst School was used as a community and recreation center beginning in the summer of 1928 after the new Higginbotham School (kindergarten through eighth grade) opened in 1927. As described in the book *Detroit's Birwood Wall*, Birdhurst's second life as a much-needed community center for area children received limited funding from the City of Detroit. Under the astute direction of Mr. Shelton Johnson, the Birdhurst Community Center was operated by volunteers from the community and from students at Wayne University (now Wayne State University) to provide a number of enrichment activities for both children and adults. Classes included sewing, tap dancing, theater, music, painting, drawing, sculpting, and storytelling. Birdhurst also had pool tables, weights for weightlifting, and showers. The outdoor activities ranged from skipping rope and hopscotch, to baseball, handball, and basketball.⁵ In the 1930s, the Birdhurst Community Center was home to popular dances for adults from the Eight Mile area.⁶

The Birdhurst Community Center's programs were a great success, and used both the building and school grounds to capacity. In the summer of 1943, Catholic nuns from the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) sisters of nearby Marygrove College initiated a summer school program at the Birdhurst Community Center, with over three hundred children in attendance. The director of the recreation programs at Birdhurst, Shelton (also Sheldon) Johnson, saw the need for a new site to accommodate a larger playfield and recreation facilities. As noted in the book *Detroit's Birwood Wall*, there still remained a distinct need for additional recreational facilities to better service the growing community. Even with both the Birdhurst and Detroit Urban League west-side office providing small outdoor play areas for the neighborhood children, a large playground and park was missing and badly needed. Acutely aware of the lack of recreation space to satisfy the needs

³ City of Detroit Recreation Department files: “Eight Mile-Wyoming Project Justification For Central Recreational Area” undated.

⁴ “Environmental History in Detroit,” University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan; <https://historyengine.richmond.edu/episodes/view/6034>

⁵ Recreation Committee of the Detroit Victory Council and Department of Parks and Recreation, *Enjoy Detroit: How to Have Fun, Where to Relax, What to Do, When to Go*, 1945.

⁶ Van Dusen, Gerald, *Detroit's Birwood Wall: Hatred and Healing in the West Eight Mile Community*, 2019, p. 144-145.

of the local neighborhood children, Director Sheldon Johnson presented to the City Plan Commission petitions signed by more than five hundred persons urging that a site in the very middle of the West Eight Mile community be designated a city park.⁷

In March of 1945, the City of Detroit announced plans for a fifteen-acre tract bounded by Cherrylawn, Chippewa, Wisconsin and Norfolk Streets to be designated a park site.⁸ The park site (a community playfield) would require that Ohio and Wisconsin Streets be vacated within that boundary and that existing homes and structures would be removed. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that a large delegation of residents in the area opposed the plan due to the removal of twenty-two families from the site.⁹ On April 24, 1945, the Detroit City Council approved and adopted a resolution of the “necessity of acquisition of land for recreational area in the blocks bounded by Wisconsin, Norfolk, Cherrylawn, and Chippewa Streets.”¹⁰ This would result in the City of Detroit’s “taking” using eminent domain of twenty-two privately owned lots.¹¹

After Council’s vote, the Carver Progressive Club, an African American social action organization,¹² submitted a letter to City Council that included a petition in opposition to the park, and asked that the land be used instead for new housing on that site. The Detroit City Plan Commission denied the Carver Progressive Club’s petition. The Detroit edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* described the families’ fight to save their homes from condemnation, and both the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free Press* covered the story. Residents and residential developer Joseph Holtzman met with the Michigan State Land Office board chairman to state their opposition to the park and advocated for new housing to be constructed.¹³ In 1946, Detroit’s Records Court (file No. 1808) rendered a verdict in favor of the City of Detroit obtaining the land from the property owners by eminent domain. By July of 1948 there were monetary awards made to each of the property owners, and their property was removed from the City’s tax rolls.

The fifteen-acre tract bounded by Wisconsin/Chippewa/Cherrylawn/Norfolk Street site became the designated park space in the community. Johnson became the local advocate for the new parkland and its potential impact for improving life in the West Eight Mile community. A footnote to Johnson’s legacy is that he coordinated local youngsters to walk the neighborhood getting signatures on petitions for the new playfield.¹⁴

Post World War II

The community’s hopes for a recreational playfield were delayed for many years. After World

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Planners Vote for Park Tract Despite Protest,” *Detroit Free Press*, March 9, 1945, page 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ City of Detroit Journal of Common Council, Corporation Council, William E. Dowling, April 24, 1945, p. 898.

¹¹ Government taking of property by eminent domain was used by Detroit’s governmental entities beginning in 1805 with the creation of the Woodward Plan. As stated in the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution, it requires “just compensation.”

¹² The Carver Progressive Club was formed in 1940 to lobby the government regarding Federal Housing Authority-backed loans and segregation in the Eight-Mile Wyoming area. They were opposed to the Birwood Wall’s construction. Later, they helped secure a compromise for temporary war housing in exchange for FHA loans to Detroit’s African Americans.

¹³ Baumgarth, E. A., “Oppose Plans for Greenbelt,” *Detroit News*, undated, p. 27.

¹⁴ Smith, Dwight, *Eight Mile Road Old Timers Club – Interviews with the Old Folks: A Historical Perspective of 8 Mile Road*, interview with Oscar Holley, June 24, 2017.

War II ended, the returning G.I.'s had aged, some married, had children, and wanted their own homes. A national housing shortage was exacerbated by the war effort's restrictions on building materials, a lack of manpower, and materials shortages. To remediate the housing shortage in Detroit, the Detroit Housing Commission contracted with the Federal Public Housing Authority to create veteran's housing. The Detroit Housing Commission stated "that the temporary housing for veterans will be removed as soon as the housing emergency will permit, and that the land upon which these houses are located will then revert back to the city departments to be used for the purposes for which they were originally acquired."¹⁵ There were several temporary war housing projects constructed in the Eight Mile-Wyoming area in the late 1940s. Because of the thousands of new workers that moved to Detroit during the war, federal and City of Detroit planning officials sought open land throughout the city for the construction of temporary wartime housing. During the Second World War, the Federal Public Housing Authority (FPHA) and the Detroit Housing Commission (DHC) built hundreds of permanent public housing units and thousands of temporary units such as Quonset huts.¹⁶

The Eight Mile-Wyoming area was the site of wartime housing sites for African Americans, and one of the largest was the 385-unit housing complex called the Robert Brooks Homes. Private Robert H. Brooks (1915-1941), an African American, was officially declared the first U. S. Armored Forces casualty of World War II. Brooks died at Fort Stotsenburg in the Philippines when the Japanese attacked the base. The Robert Brooks Homes were comprised of single-family homes located west of Wyoming Street from Pembroke Street to Eight Mile Road. The Robert Brooks Homes were financed by the United States Department of Public Welfare in 1944, and many remain intact today.

The land in the fifteen-acre tract first known as the Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield was used as veterans' temporary housing. The site was cleared of some of the homes of African Americans in 1945-46, and some homeowners remained on the site. By 1949 many of the lots on the site were consolidated and Quonset huts constructed. The City of Detroit made the Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield site available for temporary war housing for African Americans, interspersed among existing homes on the site.¹⁷ A letter from the Detroit Housing Commission to the Detroit City Council described that ten and-a-half-acres of the site were developed with city-owned Quonset huts, each containing two families. The Detroit Housing Commission began the removal of the Quonset huts in late 1953. It was eight years after the 1945 announcement of the recreational playfield that construction finally began – although it was justice delayed.

Tragedy in the Area

A tragedy struck the community when seven-year-old Lester Graves drowned in the water of an excavated sand pit on September 5, 1948. Neighbors had complained that the D'Achille Trucking Company's sand pit was a hazard, unfenced and unguarded. The construction site was owned by Harry D'Achille, owner of D'Achille Trucking Sand Company. Despite the drowning, D'Achille tried unsuccessfully to secure a circuit court injunction to restrain the city from interfering with his business. The sand pit in D'Achille's excavation site was on Eight Mile Road between

¹⁵ *Journal of the Common Council*, Resolution of the Common Council, July 15, 1946.

¹⁶ Surgue, Thomas J., *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1996, p. 69-71.

¹⁷ DTE Aerial Photograph Collection, map dated 1949, https://digital.library.wayne.edu/dte_aerial/index.html.

Greenfield and Stahelin Roads. The family of Lester Graves brought suit against D'Achille; the suit was delayed nine times, and finally went to the Supreme Court of Michigan in 1950. Judge George T. Murphy found D'Achille guilty of maintaining a nuisance, he was placed on one year's probation, and fined just \$250.00. He was ordered to install a fence around the pit and drain it.¹⁸

What the tragic loss of life demonstrated was that residents did not have recreational park space for children to play, and that they did not have a swimming facility to conduct swimming lessons. The outcome of the tragedy was recreation director Shelton Johnson's motivation to see a swimming pool constructed within the parkland.

In the mid-century era in Detroit, integrated swimming pools were very limited in number. The Detroit Parks Department managed the Central Community Center on Brewster Street in downtown Detroit, but it was many miles to travel from the Eight Mile community. The other option for African Americans was Belle Isle Park, even farther away to the south. Racial incidents and confrontations had occurred on Belle Isle, and so most West Eight Mile Road residents found the journey to not be worth the effort. West of the Eight Mile Road community at the northeast corner of Eight Mile and Greenfield Roads (in today's city of Oak Park) was the Crystal Pool, a segregated, membership-only indoor pool. While less than three miles away from the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood, the Crystal Pool remained inaccessible to African Americans throughout the mid-century era.

The Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield Site

In 1954 the City's Department of Parks and Recreation began construction of the new playfield, called the **Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield**. The Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield included a swimming pool, sun deck, permanent seats, and field house designed by the Detroit architectural firm of Giffels and Vallet, Inc. The construction firm for the project was the R. Stewart Company, Inc., and Detroit City Council approved the project at a cost of \$204,873.31 upon its completion in 1955. The field house was named the **Chippewa-Cherrylawn Recreation Center** (8640 Chippewa Street), and the building included a gymnasium, kitchen, meeting room, shower and locker rooms. The Chippewa-Cherrylawn Recreation Center was a one-story building constructed of masonry concrete block measuring eighty-eight feet by ninety-nine feet. When the playfield first opened, it contained a baseball diamond, two softball diamonds, four horseshoe courts, an outdoor basketball court and playground equipment. At that time, the community used both the Norfolk-Wisconsin Playfield as well as the adjacent Higginbotham School playfield as recreation space.

Residents of the Eight Mile-Wyoming area sent the City Council petitions as the naming of the new park was being considered. The first petition submitted by residents of the Eight-Mile Wyoming area was to name the park in commemoration of Mrs. Louise Blakely (1883-1943). Mrs. Blakely had advocated to obtain the former Birdhurst School as a community center and volunteered much of her time to organize community groups such as the Mothers Club, Red Cross First Aid classes, and a nursery school for the area. Mrs. Blakely was also an active member of the Oak Grove A. M. E. Church.

At the same time, a petition was submitted by the Pioneer Club of West Eight Mile to name the

¹⁸ "Owner of Sand Pit Ordered to Build Fence," *Detroit Free Press*, July 26, 1949, p. 5A.

park for Mrs. Pearl Gibson Wright (1881-1951). Mrs. Wright organized high school girl reserves and a youth group for girls and boys. She held the first committee meeting for the Birdhurst Community Center and was a member of the advisory board for the Birdhurst Community Center. She was one of the decision-makers in the hiring of Mr. Shelton Johnson as director. Mrs. Wright was an active member of the Ferndale Department of Recreation for intermural programs. Professionally, Mrs. Wright was a teacher at Ulysses S. Grant Elementary School in Royal Oak Township (located just across Eight Mile Road) and worked for many public improvements. She was on the Detroit Urban League Board and worked to secure scholarships for worthy Lincoln High School graduates. After her retirement from teaching, she volunteered as a special curfew officer with the Oakdale Garden Police Department and was the first woman Deputy Sheriff in the State of Michigan. Mrs. Wright was a founder of Oak Grove A.M.E. Church.

Because of the two conflicting name suggestions for the park, the west-side Detroit Urban League held a democratic vote, resulting in Mrs. Louise Blakely as the choice of the citizens of the West Eight Mile Road community. Although both African American women were outstanding pioneers and contributed greatly to the civic growth and development of the West Eight Mile Community, neither were recognized with the naming honor. Detroit's Joe Louis, World Heavyweight Boxing Champion and national hero, won the naming rights. The name was finalized in Detroit's City Council ordinance No. 78-F in December, 1955 to have the park known as the "Joe Louis Playfield."

The Johnson Recreation Center

In late 1963, the City of Detroit Parks and Recreation staff recognized that there was a need for either an addition to the Chippewa-Cherrylawn Recreation Center, or a new building to accommodate the community. In March, 1965, the Detroit Housing Commission published the "Eight Mile-Wyoming Rehabilitation Project" Development Plan and their recommendations for using federal Urban Renewal funds to improve the larger recreation site now occupied by the Joe Louis Playfield. In 1968, planning for the site and the vacation of Wisconsin Street was approved by Detroit City Council. The Eight Mile-Wyoming project described the standards for the recreation area and that the Joe Louis Playfield was at the extreme limit of providing a playground/playfield for the neighborhood. Recommendations for the recreation center were described and other city playfields were given as examples. The report concluded that the Eight Mile-Wyoming area was underserved by parkland.¹⁹

In 1970, the residents group called the Chippewa-Cherrylawn Recreation Center Advisory Committee was working with the City of Detroit's Recreation Department regarding the programs and conditions of the Joe Louis Playfield site. In a meeting in 1971, the Advisory Committee was advocating for an additional softball diamond as well as describing the poor condition of the existing Birdhurst Community Center. The Advisory Committee suggested the City undertake expansion of the field house building in order to cover the pool and that the fieldhouse building needed investment. In October, 1971, Detroit City Council passed a resolution to name the Chippewa-Cherrylawn Recreation Center the "Shelton Johnson Memorial Recreation Center." The newly-renamed Johnson Recreation Center Advisory Committee continued to advocate for a new or expanded recreation center in order to accommodate important items such as: a full court

¹⁹ Eight Mile-Wyoming Project Justification for Central Recreational Area.

basketball gymnasium, a games room, a social lounge, kitchen, office space, rest rooms and enclosed pool. After community meetings and recreation department recommendations in 1975, the City of Detroit's staff began planning to fund and design a new recreation center, first called the "Johnson Project," in 1976. The city staff recommended that the new center conform to the scale and character of the residential buildings in the area.

In October, 1976, the City of Detroit Planning Department had filed an application with the U. S. Department of Commerce under Title I of the Public Works Employment Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-369). The Public Works Employment Act was passed by the 94th Congress and the Act authorized the Secretary of Commerce to make grants to any State or local government for the construction, renovation, or repair of local public works projects. The allocation considered the severity and duration of unemployment in the proposed project area, income levels and the extent to which the project will reduce unemployment. The federal grant funded 100% of the cost of the project. The City's application was to fund the development and construction of a new recreation center for the Eight Mile-Wyoming area at a cost of \$2,483,544.00. The funding was approved by the Secretary of Commerce in August, 1977. The new structure, an addition to the existing recreation center, was designed by the Detroit architectural firm of John Stevens Associates Inc.



The firm of John Stevens Associates chose to design the new Johnson Recreation Center Building in the contemporary style of the time: the Organic Style. Organic Style architecture is a philosophy of architecture which promotes harmony between human habitation and the natural world. The design is aimed to be sympathetic and well-integrated with a site. Or in other words, a building is considered "organic" if it is entirely appropriate to its place, to its time, and to its user. The definition of Organic Architecture is from architect Frank Lloyd Wright who first used the term "organic architecture" in 1914. Wright himself named his architecture Organic Architecture, and by the mid-twentieth century and the 1970s, the style was described as buildings with iconic swooping arches, wavy lines and curved shapes to match the natural ambience.²⁰ The Johnson Recreation Center is a low one and two-story building, and all of the corners are designed in curves. Those curves are reflected in the curved knee walls (low brick walls) that are actually retaining walls for gently rolling landscaped grounds. A circular space is created from retaining walls at the

²⁰ In this context, the Organic Style references the Frank Lloyd Wright design for the Johnson Wax Headquarters Building. Wright described the Organic Style as a form of architecture that interprets nature's principals and manifests them in architecture, creating buildings that are in harmony with the world around them.

southwest corner of the property; a feature reflecting the organic style, and the earthen land raised to reflect the building's relationship to the environment.

The groundbreaking ceremony for the Johnson Recreation Center was held on November 4, 1977, and was attended by Detroit Mayor Coleman A. Young, members of the City Council and Recreation Department Director Leon Atchison. Shelton Johnson's widow, Gertie Johnson, and his family members attended the groundbreaking.²¹ Construction work for the Johnson Recreation Center was by the firm of Gough-Darin & Armstrong.

The Johnson Recreation Center's new design enclosed the existing one-story brick field house building and outdoor pool.²² The new Johnson Recreation Center added 24,722 square feet of space to the existing field house building for a total of 34,000 square feet of space. The new structure created a new basketball gymnasium, a separate dance and gymnastics gym, game rooms, locker rooms as well as a new fully-equipped boxing training gym. The project also included a surface parking lot. The existing outdoor swimming pool was enclosed and enlarged to become a 25 meter L-shaped competition swimming pool. Other new features included a senior citizen multi-purpose room, a ceramics kiln room, a hobby shop, and arts and crafts room.

The circular brick knee wall planting area in front of the Johnson Recreation Center was planted with flowers and maintained by volunteer Fred Rochelle. Mr. Rochelle was a community member and board member of the Johnson Recreation Center Advisory Council. After Mr. Rochelle passed away, the community dedicated a plaque to Mr. Rochelle that was placed in the circular planting area.²³

Programs at the Johnson Recreation Center were quite varied; there were talent shows at the center²⁴ and boxing was popular as well as swimming, arts and crafts and Modern dance lessons. In 1980, the Johnson Recreation Center Advisory Council member William Bass stated that the building had several maintenance issues.²⁵

In 1983, the City of Detroit was the recipient of a \$40,000 gift donation from Sheik Mohammed Al Fassi (1952-2002) of Morocco and Saudi Arabia. The donation was to be used to supplement the Johnson Recreation Center staff through part-time employment of selective staff. The Sheik also gave gifts to St. Louis, Missouri, and Miramar, Florida for various projects. The gift to Detroit was made because of Detroit's large Arabic population, and coincided with the Sheik's business trip to Detroit.

Joe Louis

The namesake of the Joe Louis Playfield, Joe Louis, has a significant history in American culture in the first half of the twentieth-century, and a very significant place in African American history.

²¹ City of Detroit, Department of Public Information, News Release, *Johnson Recreation Center to Get \$2 Million Expansion*, November 4, 1977.

²² "U. S. Aid to Create New Jobs," *Detroit Free Press*, September 17, 1977.

²³ Smith, Dwight, interviewed on April 1, 2020.

²⁴ "City Needs Better Places to Play," *Detroit Free Press*, July 28, 1974, p. 4-F.

²⁵ Jackson, Luther, "Council Wants Funds for Human Services," *Detroit Free Press*, February 12, 1980, p. 3-A.

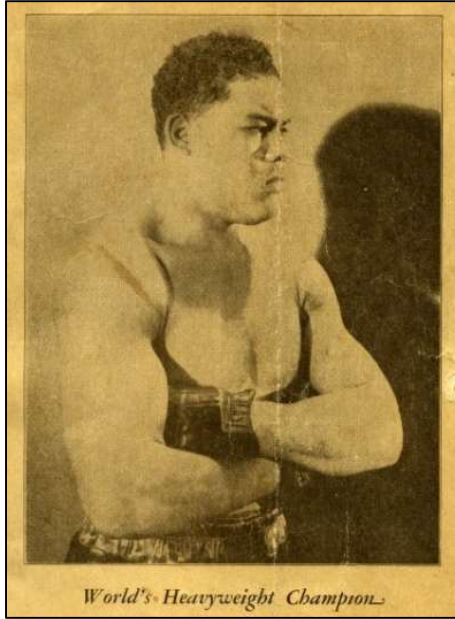


Image courtesy of the Detroit Historical Museum

Born Joe Louis Barrow in 1914 in the Buckalew Mountain region of Alabama, Joe Louis (1914-1981), grew up the seventh child of a farmer. As a young child, Joe Barrow worked in the fields of Alabama, but when his step-father saw opportunities for a life in the growing city of Detroit, he moved the family there. Joe Barrow's early life in Detroit beginning at the age of ten, consisted of working various labor and automotive jobs while attending Bronson Trade School. Joe Louis (Barrow) was discovered by a local amateur boxer named Thurston McKinney and he began training under Holman Williams, also a Detroit amateur boxer. Through hard work and continuous training at the Brewster Recreation Center boxing ring, Joe Louis began his amateur boxing career. Joe Louis fought fifty-eight amateur matches, losing only four. Upon the advice of colleague, Joe Louis Barrow dropped his last name for professional purposes, and he went on to make professional boxing history.

In 1930s America, boxing was the number one sport in the country, with both the highest paid salaries and national fame. In a professional boxing career spanning over seventeen years, Joe Louis became a household name, fighting fifty-four fights with fifty victories and forty-three knockouts. The most famous fight of his career was held on June 22, 1938 at Yankee Stadium when Louis had a rematch fight the German heavyweight, Max Schmelling, pride of Hitler's athletes. Louis won that fight, and went on to a prizefighter career for many years following. Nicknamed "The Brown Bomber" by the press, he defended his title of heavyweight boxing champion thirteen consecutive times. In all, Louis made twenty-five defenses of his heavyweight title from 1937 to 1948, and was a world champion for eleven years and ten months. Both titles remain records in the heavyweight division, the former in any division. Louis' most remarkable record was for the knock-out of twenty-three opponents in twenty-seven title fights, including five world champions.

Joe Louis served in World War II and was placed in the Special Services Division where he fought for the Army and Navy Relief Fund drives as well as traveling more than 22,000 miles and staging 96 boxing exhibitions before two million soldiers.²⁶ Joe Louis demonstrated that his ring performance was reflected in his public relations and community civic responsibility. By selflessly raising funds for national causes such as the Cancer Fund and the Sister Kenny Foundation's polio institute, Louis was given national press. Additionally, local Detroit causes were recipients of Louis' generosity when he donated to the Detroit Urban League Westside Office located at 20435 Northlawn Street, the United Fund's Community Chest, and many others. Louis was extremely generous to his family paying for homes, cars, and education for his parents and siblings. Major League Baseball's first African American player, Jackie Robinson, wrote a tribute to Joe Louis and described him as "a hero to Black America, to all Americans...that paved the way for the Black Man in professional sports."²⁷ Louis was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold

²⁶ Pitts, Ray, *The Joe Louis Story*.

²⁷ Robinson, Jackie, *A Tribute to Joe Louis*, Caesar's Palace Tribute Booklet.

Medal in 1982, the highest award given to civilians by the U.S. legislative branch.

Joe Louis is commemorated in many ways in Detroit. At the intersection of downtown Detroit's main streets at Woodward Avenue and Jefferson Avenue is a sculpture titled "Memorial to Joe Louis" which is locally known as "The Fist," by sculptor Robert Graham (1938-2008). The twenty-eight-foot bronze sculpture of Louis' arm and hand is suspended from a four-legged steel armature (dedicated in 1986). Another significant artwork commemorating Joe Louis is located on the Grand Concourse of the TCF Center, formerly known as Cobo Hall. A twelve-foot tall bronze of Louis in fighting gear; gloves, boxing shorts and shoes is by African American sculptor Edward N. Hamilton (b. 1947) and was installed in 1987.

Certainly the most monumental commemoration of Joe Louis was the Joe Louis Sports Arena in Detroit. Joe Louis Arena (651 West Jefferson Avenue) was designed by the Detroit architectural firm of Smith, Hinchman and Grylls in 1977 at a cost of four million dollars when it opened in 1979. Joe Louis Arena had a seating capacity of between 19,000 – 20,000 depending on the type of event. The project included a connected parking structure, and a People Mover (monorail) Station. Home to the Detroit Red Wings National Hockey League team, this windowless building was located on the Detroit Riverfront. In addition to hockey, the building was host to many concerts, playoff championships, and events in its forty-year existence including the 1980 Republican National Convention. Joe Louis Arena was demolished in 2020.

Other areas of the country commemorated Joe Louis. An eight-foot bronze statue of Louis is outside the Chambers County Courthouse in LaFayette, Alabama near his hometown. The statue, by sculptor Casey Downing, Jr., sits on a base of red granite and was created in 2010. Various other facilities have been named after Joe Louis. In 1984, New York City's Madison Square Garden's main entry plaza along Seventh Avenue was named Joe Louis Plaza in his honor. A suburban Chicago golf course in Riverdale, Illinois was renamed the Joe Louis "The Champ" Golf Course in 1986.

Detroiters will be able to ride their bikes or walk along the Joe Louis Greenway, a 32-mile non-motorized pathway that runs from the east side of the Detroit Riverfront to Highland Park, Hamtramck, and Dearborn. It currently includes the Dequindre Cut Greenway and planning and acquisition is under way for its expanded plan which will be completed in phases.

Shelton Johnson

Shelton (also referred to as Sheldon) Johnson (1905-1965) devoted most of his professional life to recreation in the Eight Mile Road-Wyoming area. He joined the City of Detroit Parks and Recreation Department as a Playleader on June 25, 1927. Mr. Johnson was the first Community House Supervisor at the John J. Considine Recreation Center (located on Woodward Avenue), and then spent the remainder of his career as recreation director at the Birdhurst Recreation Center, and then at the Chippewa Cherrylawn Recreation Center in the Eight Mile-Wyoming neighborhood.²⁸ Mr. Johnson's career and reputation in Detroit were described in the oral history

²⁸ "Shelton Johnson, Recreation Aide" *Detroit Free Press*, obituary, November 2, 1965.



Portrait of Shelton Johnson
by Bennie White Jr. Ethiopia Israel
provided by Ajia Mitchell

reports recorded by Dwight Smith, President of the Eight Mile Road Old Timers Club in 2017. Most every interviewee described Shelton Johnson as their role model based on his kindness, and that he was a sportsman who loved to play baseball, basketball and coached boxing.²⁹ In 1944, Mr. Johnson organized Youth Service Organization (YSO) programs that included a library, kitchen, and discussion programs for the youth at the Birdhurst Center.³⁰

Six years after Shelton Johnson's death, in 1971 Detroit City Council passed an ordinance naming the Chippewa Cherrylawn Recreation Center the "Shelton Johnson Memorial Recreation Center" and a dedication ceremony was held in January of 1972. The new Johnson Recreation Center opened in 1979. Shelton Johnson's portrait by Bennie White Jr. Ethiopia Israel once hung in the Johnson Recreation Center.

One of the Detroit sports stars to come out of the Johnson Recreation Center was Anthony Hembrick, a middleweight boxer. Hembrick trained at the Johnson Recreation Center, and after many years of hard work and training, Hembrick was the 1986 and 1987 United States Amateur Middleweight champion, while boxing for the United States Army. He went on to the Olympics in Seoul Korea in 1988. Unfortunately, due to a mix-up in timing, Hembrick and his coach did not appear for his scheduled bout. Hembrick was then disqualified to box at the 1988 Olympics. Still, Hembrick went on to professional boxing matches at the Palace of Auburn Hills, Michigan in 1989.³¹

John Stevens Associates Inc.

The Detroit architectural firm of John Stevens Associates, Architects, Engineers & Planners was an accomplished firm that designed renovations to many downtown Detroit properties in the late 20th Century. The design of the Johnson Recreation Center won an honor award from the Detroit Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) for the firm in 1979.³² The firm of John Stevens Associates also designed renovations for the Peoples Wayne County Bank Building (also known as the State Savings Bank Building) in downtown Detroit, the firm designed the new-construction Sentinel Center office building (1972) on East Jefferson Avenue, the renovation of the Cadillac Tower lobby and retail storefronts (1985), and the Stevens Office Building in downtown Detroit (511 East Larned), a redesigned a historic warehouse (1975) for John Stevens' architectural firm, and a law firm.

The West Eight Mile community lost population as younger generations gained income and moved on in the 1970s and 1980s, however, today the community remains a stable and intact neighborhood in Detroit. In 2006, the City of Detroit closed several recreation centers, and the Johnson Recreation Center closed at that time. Since vacated in 2006, the Johnson Recreation

²⁹ Rockwell, Tod, "Considine Lauds Gloves," *Detroit Free Press*, January 12, 1939, p. 16.

³⁰ Pooler, James S., "City's Program Halts Growth of Delinquency," *Detroit Free Press*, March 14, 1944.

³¹ Saylor, Jack, "Hembrick: no lack of confidence, goals," *Detroit Free Press*, April 19, 1989.

³² "Architecturally speaking, this one's a winner," *Detroit Free Press*, December 7, 1979.

Center has been used as storage for the City of Detroit's General Services Department's archive of Recreation Department files and equipment. Regardless, the community uses the Joe Louis Playfield and the playground equipment. In 2020, the University of Detroit Jesuit High School completed the purchase of the vacant Johnson Recreation Center, Joe Louis Playfield and a portion of the Higginbotham School playfield from the City of Detroit. The University of Detroit Jesuit High School's plan is to renovate and reactivate the facility.³³ Plans also call for improvements to the Joe Louis Playfield for three new competition-grade soccer and lacrosse fields. Through the City of Detroit's Community Benefits process, there is an agreement that includes maintaining the original names of the properties, and to make the center is available for neighborhood association meetings and additional programs.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Joe Louis Playfield

The Joe Louis Playfield's historic boundary is a ten acre-rectangular site located to the north of the Johnson Recreation Center and is bounded on the north by Norfolk Street; on the east by Cherrylawn Street; on the south by Chippewa Street; and on the west by the vacated Wisconsin Street. The new property boundary continues to the west of the vacated Wisconsin Street to include the former playfield of the Higginbotham School. The Higginbotham School playfield is not fenced and is covered in grass. The revised boundary runs south to the parking lot of the Higginbotham School creating an "L" shape.

The northwest corner of the Joe Louis Playfield near Norfolk Street is paved with asphalt for a regulation-size basketball court. At the northeast corner of the Joe Louis Playfield at Cherrylawn and Norfolk Streets is a full regulation-size baseball diamond and field with an aluminum chain link backstop. At the southeast corner of the Joe Louis Playfield is playground equipment and a swing set. The southwest side of the Joe Louis Playfield has another baseball diamond with the field extending to the northeast. There are trees interspersed around the south side of the playfield and along Cherrylawn Street, but otherwise it is mostly comprised of grass.

The southwest corner of the Joe Louis Playfield at Chippewa Avenue and the former (now vacated) Wisconsin Street is a lawn planted with various trees. A sidewalk runs north from Chippewa Street, along the western side of the former Wisconsin Street. There is a fifty-six space asphalt-paved parking lot that served both Higginbotham School and the Johnson Recreation Center. The parking lot has rectangular concrete planting areas holding full-growth trees. Two parking lot lighting fixtures are centered in the parking lot planting areas.

On the east side of the parking lot are bicycle racks formed in half-circle steel pipes set in concrete, original to the 1977 Johnson Recreation Center. The landscaping surrounding the Chippewa Avenue side of the Johnson Recreation Center includes different varieties of mature trees and grass. The southwest corner of the property of the building has a circular low brick retaining wall

³³ Williams, Candice, "Detroit council approves sale of Johnson Recreation Center to U of D Jesuit," *The Detroit News*, May 7, 2019.

that has two entry gaps for pedestrians. The enclosed circle once contained flower plantings, but now only has grass. The low brick retaining walls are comprised of the same orange and brown bricks that face the Johnson Recreation Center, but they are set in a vertical (not horizontal) bond. The brick walls are capped with concrete coping. The brick walls' design reflects the rounded curves of the Johnson Recreation Center.

There are several grey concrete-paved square walkway areas surrounding the Johnson Recreation Center's two entries on Chippewa Street. The entrance walkways on the Chippewa Street side of the Johnson Recreation Center are defined by low brick retaining walls, aluminum light fixtures, and a flagpole on the west side of the property. There are gentle landscaped mounds that incline at the front Chippewa Street lawns. The center of the Chippewa Street lawn is mostly comprised of grass, but at the east side of the front lawn, several white pine trees are on the site. The western entry to the building on the Chippewa Street elevation is marked by a low brick retaining wall and raised landscaped areas. At the Chippewa Street side of the property are grey concrete sidewalk slabs directly adjacent to the curb.

An aluminum chain-link fence is at the north and western perimeters of the Joe Louis Playfield beginning at the northern edge of the Johnson Recreation Center's eastern façade along Cherrylawn Street. The chain-link fence runs the length of Cherrylawn Street where it turns the corner at Norfolk Street. At Norfolk Street it continues westward, stopping at the property line of the former Higginbotham School. There is an opening in the fence for pedestrian entry at the former Wisconsin Street sidewalk on the property line.

The revised property boundary continues to the west to include the former playfield of the Higginbotham School. The playfield is not fenced and is covered in grass. There are sidewalks at the Norfolk and Indiana Street sides of the property. The revised boundary runs south to the parking lot of the Higginbotham School.

Johnson Recreation Center

The Johnson Recreation Center faces south onto Chippewa Avenue, and it is bordered on the west by Wisconsin Street, a vacated street, on the northwest side of Detroit. The Johnson Recreation Center occupies the southern quarter of the large, block-long parcel known as the Joe Louis Playfield, which is located approximately nine miles northwest of downtown. To the west, at the opposite side of the vacated Wisconsin Street property is the former William E. Higginbotham School (now vacant).

The Johnson Recreation Center is a one and two-story steel-frame and masonry structure finished in orange and brown face-brick veneer. The structure faces onto Chippewa Avenue, and has a roughly rectangular footprint with various set-backs that accentuate the different rooms of the building. The building totals 34,000 square feet of space and has areas that are one-story, and other sections that are two-stories in height. The Johnson Recreation Center reflects the Organic Style of architecture and all of the corner edges of the building are rounded curves, creating a curvilinear corner at each side the building.³⁴

³⁴ The Organic Style, in this context, is based on the design of the Johnson Wax Headquarters Building designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

The building's Chippewa Avenue elevation is the primary façade, (the south façade). The Chippewa Avenue facade has two main entrances to the building. There is white lettering for "JOHNSON RECREATION CENTER" at the second story of the western side of the Chippewa Avenue façade. On the south façade is a one-story section containing a wide entry supported by a long truss overhead. The brick veneer sheathing the building is mostly laid in running bond, and double rows of soldier-course bond line the base, middle and parapet of the building. There is metal coping at the roofline.

The Chippewa Avenue facade is windowless with one exception; a three-part horizontal window that lights the office space. There is a wide, recessed three-door pedestrian entry at the west side of the Chippewa Avenue façade (currently a roll-down security door is in place). Another recessed double-door pedestrian entrance is at the east side of the Chippewa Avenue façade. On the roof above the three-door entry, running east along the building is a roof-top metal screen that hides the heating, ventilation and air cooling systems on the roof.

The building's "L" shaped swimming pool (a natatorium) is at the east side of the structure, and the natatorium's rounded corners wrap the edges of the Cherrylawn Avenue façade. The Cherrylawn Avenue façade (the east façade) is windowless and has the same arrangement of an orange and brown brick veneer alternating from a double soldier course, running bond, soldier course, running bond and soldier course at the roofline.

The Johnson Recreation Center elevation facing the Joe Louis Playfield (the north façade) is windowless and also has rounded corners and varying setbacks for the three main sections of the rear of the building. There is a rounded cornered, one-story recessed entry at the junction of the pool and rear room of the Johnson Recreation Center. The one-story section's roof holds the heating, ventilation and air cooling systems for the natatorium side of the building. An exhaust chimney is at the eastern side of the roof. There is a screen around the mechanical systems that is comprised of metal horizontal slats.

The west façade of the Johnson Recreation Center faces the parking lot. There is a two-story section on the northern half of the façade that accommodates the building's gymnasium. There is a one-and-a-half story section of the building that is at the southwest corner of the building. A three-part horizontal window is at the south side of the west façade. All of the edges and corners of the structure are curved. There is a recessed pedestrian entry at the junction between the gymnasium and the front section. A curved horizontal brick awning is over the entry. A steel door is at the entry.

CRITERIA

The proposed Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Historic District appears to meet the National Register Criteria A, C, and G:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; and
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- G. Properties that have achieved significance within the past fifty years.

List of Contributing and Noncontributing Resources

The proposed Johnson Recreation Center and Joe Louis Playfield Historic District consists of a single contributing building resource, the land that comprises the Joe Louis playfield and the Higginbotham School playfield to the west. The Johnson Recreation Center is less than fifty years old, and the Historic Designation Advisory Board must be guided by the National Register standard that structures less than fifty years old are not eligible for designation unless they have exceptional importance. The building's strong significance in the history of community relations in Detroit provides grounds for Criterion G.

COMPOSITION OF THE HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine members, who are residents of Detroit, and two ex-officio members. The appointed members are Melanie A. Bazil, Naomi Beasley Porter, Carolyn C. Carter, Keith A. Dye, Louis Fisher, Zene Fogel-Gibson, Theresa Hagood, Calvin Jackson, and Joseph Rashid. The ex-officio members, who may be represented by members of their staff, are the Director of the City Planning Commission and the Director of the Planning and Development Department. Ad hoc members for this study are Rev. Theodore G. Munz of the University of Detroit Jesuit High School, and Hazel Fludd, a neighborhood resident, Teresa J. Moon, a neighborhood resident.

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