

STAFF REPORT: 08/13/2025 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: A. DYE

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00489

ADDRESS: 2733 SECOND AVENUE (AKA CASS PARK)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: CASS PARK LOCAL

APPLICANT: RAYSAHUN LANDRUM, GENERAL SERVICES DEPT. (GSD), CITY OF DETROIT

PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 07/21/2025

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 07/28/2025

SCOPE: REHABILITATE PARK, REVISE INTERNAL PATH LAYOUT

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Cass Park is a 1.1 acre generally flat open space that is bound by Temple Avenue to the north, Second Avenue to the east and west (east side is northbound; west side is southbound) and Ledyard Street to the south. The park is comprised of eight entrances, centrally placed on the four sides and at each corner. Wide, straight concrete paths lead from each entrance toward the center of the park, which is comprised of three asymmetrically placed, and differently sized, mounded circular areas covered with turf. The largest mound holds a contemporary sculpture “Pink Landscape, Three Trusses Plus” designed by James Lawton. The majority of the ground is flat covered with turf or concrete/asphalt surfaces. An additional narrow, straight concrete path is located within the tree canopy on three sides of the park and connects the southeast, southwest and northwest corner entrances.



Looking north near the center of the park (red arrow on aerial photo). Masonic Temple rises above the trees. Staff photo.



Looking south from the center of the park (blue arrow on aerial photo). Cass Technical High School is seen beyond the trees. Staff photo.



The north and south entrances align with Second Avenue, before it splits around the park as one-way, north-south streets. The Burns statue alignment with the Fisher Building in the distance offers a striking visual and physical connection.

South-Central Entrance



North-Central Entrance



Above: Looking north. // Below: Looking south. Monument at southern central entrance includes a concrete vertical sign that says "Cass Park" and three symmetrically placed flag poles. All elements are within a raised landscaped bed enclosed by a low concrete wall. Erected, circa 1970s. Staff photos.

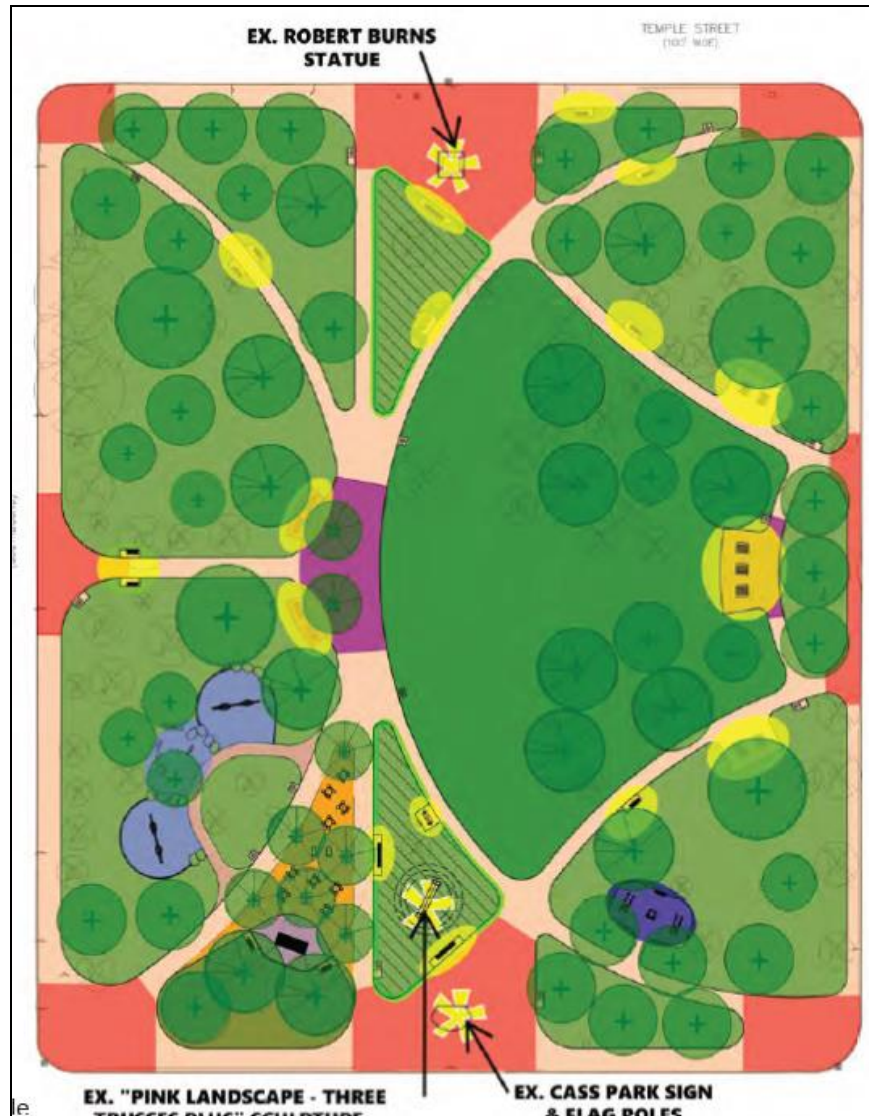
Above: Looking south. // Below: Looking north. Monument at northern central entrance is comprised of a bronze statue of poet Robert Burns atop a granite base. Inset bronze reliefs on the sides and rear of the pedestal include brief verse from various poems. Burns, a Mason, faces the Masonic Temple. Erected in 1921. Staff photos.



PROPOSAL

Rehabilitation of the park, per the submitted documents and drawings. Proposed work items include the installation of walkways in a revised layout; removal of invasive trees and planting of additional trees; installation of play elements, benches and picnic tables; and the replacement of fitness equipment.

Work is scheduled to take place in Spring 2026.



Applicant rendering of proposed design

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Cass Park Local Historic District was enacted on December 22, 2016; the park is identified as a contributing resource to the district.
- Cass Park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005; its period of significance is identified as 1860 – 1955.
- According to the district's Final Report:
 - Lewis Cass began subdividing the front of his farm in 1836; the area that includes Cass Park began to be sold as lots after 1859.
 - In 1860, Lewis Cass deeded a section of land to the city to develop into a park “for public use and enjoyment” subject to the requirement that the land “be used and occupied as a park forever.”
 - The park and the surrounding area were platted by Henry Ledyard, Cass's son-in-law and attorney.
 - The grant was eventually accepted by the council and Cass Park became a part of the collection of many small, beautiful parks scattered throughout the city.
 - Cass Park is the only one of these small parks that is still in existence today.
 - In 1875, the fence that had enclosed Cass Park was removed, and the park was landscaped with a donation of new trees in observance of the nation's Centennial.
 - E.W. Voigt (who had his house on the northeast corner of Second and Ledyard) donated a fountain for Cass Park matching a fountain that he had previously seen on his travels to Germany.
 - The erection of an electric arc light tower in the early 1880s made Cass Park one of the most popular summer evening resorts in the city.
 - In 1921, the Detroit Burns Club donated a statue of the Scottish poet Robert Burns and was erected at the north end of Cass Park.



*Above: Undated photo of original fountain.
Right: Burns statue, June 15, 1929.
Burton Collection.*





Left and below: These undated photos capture seating, lighting, trash, and landscape design from the early 1920s (as evidenced by the car in the photo at left and the construction fence at the base of Masonic Temple in the below photo). Burton Collection.



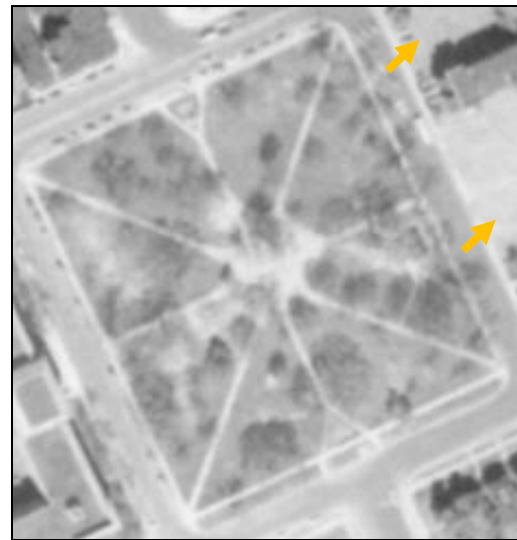


Northeast corner path, looking north towards Temple Avenue. Notice the abundance of seating. Photo date: 1922 – 1926, Burton Collection.

- Reviewing the Elements of Design for the Cass Park Local Historic District, staff listed the elements that identify features of the park:
 - (12) ***Walls of continuity.*** ...*Significantly, buildings in the district create a wall of continuity surrounding Cass Park. Mature trees create a wall of continuity along the perimeter of Cass Park and provide a sense of enclosure within the park.*
 - (20) ***Orientation, vistas, overviews...*** *Buildings flanking Cass Park create a sense of enclosure and contribute greatly to the integrity of feeling and setting within the park. The statue of Robert Burns sits on the northern edge of Cass Park, centered on its block face, and faces north along Second Avenue. Cass Park bisects Second Avenue and, consequently, provides a vista that is visible from a great distance to the north.*
 - (21) ***Symmetric or asymmetric appearance.*** ...*Cass Park is highly symmetrical in nature, with eight (8) sidewalks converging on the center of the park from each corner and from the center of each of its four (4) sides; this relationship is considered a significant feature of the park.*
 - (22) ***General environmental character.*** *The general character of the district is that of a dense, mixed –use, urban neighborhood of apartment, office, and institutional buildings, surrounding and complimenting the green space of Cass Park.*
- The basis of every review of proposed work for a building/site/landscape begins with determining the level of its integrity. The National Park Service (NPS) identified seven aspects to determine integrity: historic location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association. The NPS states features can include spatial relationships, vegetation, original property boundary, topography/grading, site furnishings, design intent, architectural features and circulation system.
 - The NPS also states that a landscape doesn't need to retain all of its original/historic characteristic features that it had during the period of significance, however it must retain enough (or restored enough) of the essential features to make its historic character clearly recognizable.
 - ♦ To evaluate the historic integrity of a designed landscape, it is important to compare the existing conditions and function to its historical appearance and function (date of significance: 1860 – 1955).



Current conditions via Google earth.



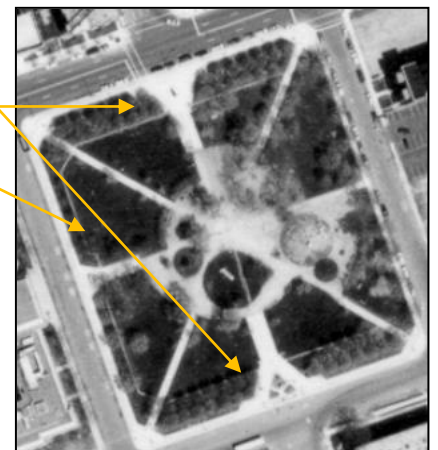
1952 DTE aerial photo. It is interesting to note that a large amount of demolition had already occurred on the east side of Second Avenue (arrows).



- It is staff's opinion the existing park retains all aspects/features of integrity.
 - Location and Setting – These features remain intact. Many of the open lots on Second Avenue (east side of the park) were in existence within the period of significance (as seen in the 1952 aerial image). Also, new construction can be erected on lots facing the park without any impact to the park itself, thereby re-establishing a continuous street wall on four sides.
 - Design – Eight paths leading to the center of the park, and the north-south axis of Second Avenue bisecting the park, are in the same location as those shown on the ca. 1860 park drawing within the applicant's proposal. The central feature has been altered numerous times, including its size and footprint; however, the experience of an intentional walk towards, or away from, the center of the park/open space endures. The level ground of the wooded areas of the park remains; the non-historic mounds can be removed without long-term impact to the spatial relationship of the walkways and greenspace.
 - Materials and Workmanship – Photo documentation confirms the eight park paths have had a concrete surface since the 1920s and the granite and bronze Robert Burns monument is a strong example of early 20th century statuary. Other contemporary paving materials, namely asphalt and individual masonry pavers, have been used in the central non-historic walking surface and can be easily removed or replaced with a compatible paving material.
 - Feeling and Association – The essential character and feeling of a late 19th/early 20th century park persists, as it relates back to the spatial design/placement of the paths, relative to the surrounding streets as well as the park's central element. The abundant tree cover and undivided/undisturbed turf lawn continues to create a tranquil setting within the urban neighborhood.



Comparing the 1981 (left) and 1997 (right) aerial photos, staff noticed the widening of the north, west and south entry paths, the planting of two rows of trees at the north and south ends of the park, and the introduction of a perimeter path (north, west, south). The applicant identifies the rows of trees as Bradford trees, an invasive species which are also in poor condition. The Bradford trees are proposed to be removed, and native and non-invasive varieties will be spaced and planted based on the proposed path design. DTE photos.



- The topographical changes made between 1981 and 1997 were compatible with the design and use of the park.



Left: This current photo was taken at the northeast corner entrance and looks west. The wide corner path leads to the center of the park, and the narrow perimeter path (outlined in the 1997 aerial photo on the preceding page) connects seven of the nine park entrances.

Below: Looking north, this portion of the perimeter path at the southern side of the west entrance was disrupted by the roots of the adjacent tree. According to the applicant's arborist tree survey, this tree is to remain (arrow on tree survey). Staff photos, July 2025.



- Staff walked the perimeter path along the circumference of the park (south, west and north sides). The narrow path's placement within the tree canopy and surrounding landscape offered a quiet pastoral park experience, in contrast to the formal and monumental experience when walking on the wide paths toward the center of the park and outward to the entrances/exits.
- While not a historic feature, it is a very nice walking experience. It is not identified on the proposed site plan, so staff assumes it is to be removed as part of the proposed rehabilitation.



- TREE, POOR CONDITION (-59)
- TREE, FAIR CONDITION (46 TO REMAIN)
- TREE, GOOD CONDITION (16 TO REMAIN)

NOTE: PROPOSE PLANTING OF 60+ NEWER TREES



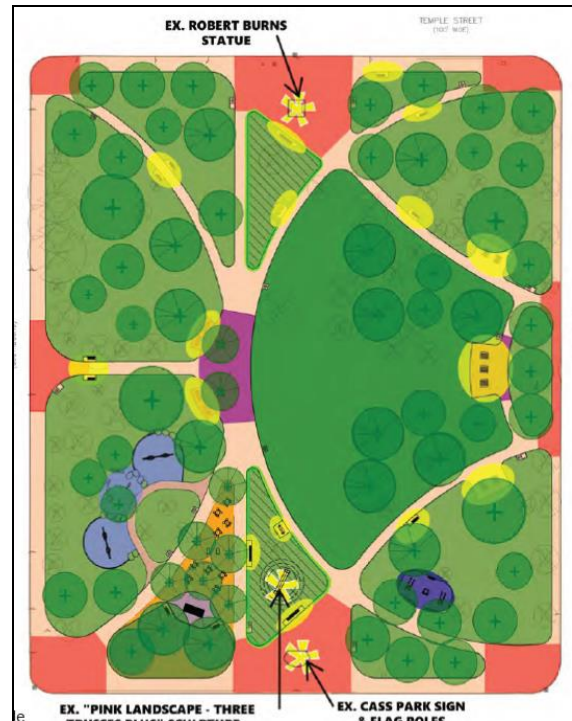
INVASIVE BRADFORD PEAR

Excerpt from page 22 of applicant's document.

- Taking into account the district's Elements of Design and the park's level of integrity, it is staff's opinion that the proposed layout is not a compatible design as it will destroy the distinctive character-defining features of the park. The applicant referenced the Elements of Design in its presentation document and offered comments on how these elements were addressed in the proposed design. They are reprinted here, along with staff's reply.



Existing conditions



Applicant rendering of proposed design.

(20) Orientation, vistas, overviews

"Cass Park bisects Second Avenue and provides a vista that is visible from a great distance to the north."

In this plan the vista along Second Avenue through the park is retained with walkway and landscaping.

Staff: The vista along Second Avenue is not retained, as the main north-south walkway is to be moved to the west and out of alignment with the historic central axis on which the north and south paths and monuments were placed.

(21) Symmetric or asymmetric appearance.

Cass Park is highly symmetrical in nature with eight entries converging on the center of the park from each corner and from the center of each of its four sides: this relationship is considered a significant feature of the park.

The symmetry is retained along one axis, as well as retaining eight entrances that converge in the center of the park, although slightly shifted to the west to allow for larger green space to improve park usability. This is in keeping with the incremental movements away from perfect symmetry started in 1934 and continued into the 1970s.

Staff: The period of significance for the park is 1860 – 1955. The move away from perfect symmetry in 1934 was a subtle one, by the expansion of pavement at one (of the eight) confluence of two paths, and the addition of a comfort station. The central axis remained in alignment with Second Avenue and the hexagonal path design – all leading to the center of the park - remained undisturbed.

The changes to the park, including the fountain's removal, were completed prior to the district's designation; therefore the recreation of original/historic elements is not required to meet the Standards. Future work must be compatible and consistent with the general characteristics of a historic park of its type and period, as well as not cause the removal of distinctive character-defining features.

(12) Walls of continuity

“Mature trees along the perimeter of Cass Park that provide a sense of enclosure within the park.”

This plan replaces damaged/unhealthy/invasive trees along the perimeter and throughout the park.

Staff: No issues. The extensive tree canopy that is at the east and west sides of the park will remain intact, and an abundance of new trees are proposed for the interior and northern and southern park areas.

“The statue of Robert Burns sits on the northern edge of Cass Park, centered on its block face, and faces north along Second Avenue.”

The statue of Robert Burns remains in the same prominent location in the northern edge of the park, with minor repairs to the base.

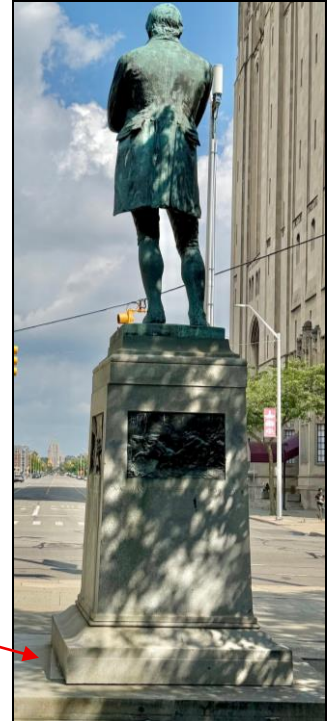
Staff: Staff noticed the shift of the monument on its base and highlights this issue in the photos below. The base is inscribed and is one of many components that comprise the statue, which is distinctive character-defining feature of the park. A detailed, bulleted scope of work for the “minor repairs” must be submitted for staff review prior to work taking place.



Front and east side.



West side.



Back/south side

Evidence of monument movement is highlighted. On page 13 of the applicant's Cass Park Engagement document, it is stated the monument has been hit by cars. Staff photos.



The base inscription says: “Presented to the City by the Detroit Burns Club A.D. 1921”. Staff photo.

- Pages 4-5 of the applicant's presentation document outlines the public engagement that took place from October 2024 – March 2025. The applicant states the proposed design is based on the outcomes of this engagement. An additional presentation document "Cass Park Engagement Summary – HDC" goes into some detail on the public's feedback from the engagement sessions. This document is posted on the property page as part of the applicant's review materials.

ISSUES

- The proposed park rehabilitation does not meet the district's Elements of Design, specifically #20-Orientation, vistas, overviews; and #21-Symmetric appearance of Cass Park.
- The new design will remove the historic circulation patterns, including the central axis and placement of the historic paths and their relationship to the central open space, thus altering the features and spaces that characterize the property.
- The applicant has not demonstrated that a park design that is compatible with the existing circulation pattern cannot meet the interests and potential uses listed within the public engagement document.
- Specifications for the proposed sign were not included in this application, including size, material, post(s) and placement (it isn't identified on the site plan).

RECOMMENDATION

Section 21-2-78, Determinations of Historic District Commission

Recommendation 1 of 2, Denial

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be inappropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Cass Park Local Historic District's Elements of Design, specifically:

Standard 1) A property shall be used for its historic purpose or be placed in a new use that requires minimal change to the defining characteristics of the building and its site and environment.

Standard 2) The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.

And

Elements of Design #20 and 21.

For the following reasons;

- The proposed park rehabilitation does not meet the district's Elements of Design, specifically #20) Orientation, vistas, overviews; and #21) Symmetric appearance of Cass Park.
- The new design will remove the historic circulation patterns, including the central axis and placement of the historic paths and their relationship to the central open space, thus altering the features and spaces that characterize the property.
- The applicant has not demonstrated that a park design that is compatible with the existing circulation pattern cannot meet the interests and potential uses listed within the public engagement document.

Recommendation 2 of 2, Certificate of Appropriateness: Remaining work item (sign)

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be appropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Cass Park Local Historic District's Elements of Design, with the condition that:

- Specifications for the sign including size, material, post(s) and placement be submitted for staff review.