

STAFF REPORT 10-8-2025 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: G. LANDSBERG

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00576

ADDRESS: 795 LONGFELLOW (VOIGT PARK)

HISTORIC DISTRICT: BOSTON-EDISON

APPLICANT/OWNER: GENERAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT, CITY OF DETROIT

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 09-16-2025

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 09-26-2025

SCOPE: INSTALL PAVED CONCRETE PATHS AND PADS FOR BENCHES & TRASH RECEPTACLES

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Named after the neighborhood's developer, Edward Voigt, this classic neighborhood park is a key contributing historic resource for Boston-Edison. The park occupies just under 7 acres in an east-west orientation featuring over 800 feet of frontage along Longfellow and Edison, the residential streets that frame it at the north and south. It is bound by Third Avenue to the west, and Second Avenue to the east.



General view of Voigt Park, facing west. Note lack of accessible pathways. Staff photo, September 26, 2025.

The park's current condition and utility has diminished since the historic era. The tree canopy has degraded, with approximately 50 trees remaining of a much larger historic number once approaching 150. Promenade paths, planted flower beds, and even an early 20th century park shelter have all vanished from this historic landscape, mostly in the decades before historic designation. Currently extant park elements, in addition to the trees, include several historic reproduction PVC lampposts installed in the early 21st century and modern identification signage at the corners. The park is notable in its current condition for being without walking paths or perimeter sidewalks, excepting along the shorter Second and Third sides; given the robust historic pedestrian infrastructure throughout the district, it is somewhat awkward to approach and does not necessarily have design elements that welcomes visitors. Without interior paths, defined vistas, designed outdoor spaces, or amenities the park offers a fairly one-dimensional experience to visitors who do venture across the street, and is mostly restricted to ambulatory users. There is no invitation to linger.

The park is framed by a few dozen contributing structures, all of them large private residences of historic age, that establish the park's grand setting and imbue it with an intrinsic role as an important community and civic space, more than a mere mown field populated by trees. The park is clearly sized and sited for the enjoyment of the entire neighborhood, and is a major cultural landscape that is inextricably part of Boston-Edison's history; indeed, in a physical and urbanistic sense, it is the heart of the district.



Parcel view of vicinity, 795 Longfellow (Voigt Park) is outlined in yellow. Note that the park's name is misspelled here.



Partial view of Voigt Park, with the James Couzens mansion (610 Longfellow) visible. National Register of Historic Places Nomination, 1975. Photo taken by Eileen Kosnick in December 1973, coincident with local designation.



A second and final view of Voigt Park as included in the 1975 Designation Report, also taken by Eileen Kosnick. The view is toward Third Avenue along Longfellow, showing one of the former circulation paths.



View to the north along the Second Avenue sidewalk, with the James Couzens mansion (610 Longfellow) partially visible. Note temporary plastic trash barrel. Staff photo, September 26, 2025.



Mid-park view of non-historic PVC lamppost, looking west. The lack of visible walking paths makes the siting of such elements appear haphazard. Staff photo, September 29, 2025.



View to the east along Edison. Staff photo, September 26, 2025.



Newly planted tree along Longfellow. Staff photo, September 26, 2025.

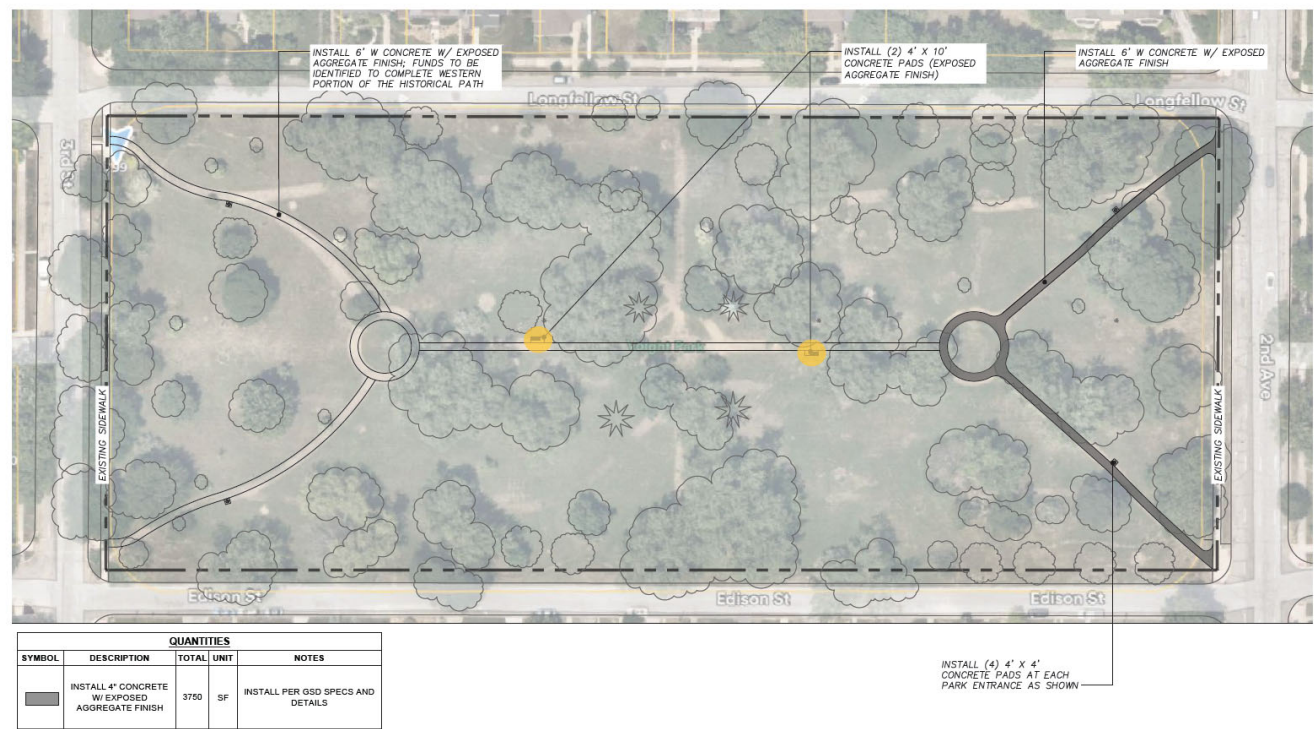
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Per the submitted drawings and documents, the city’s General Services Department proposes to:

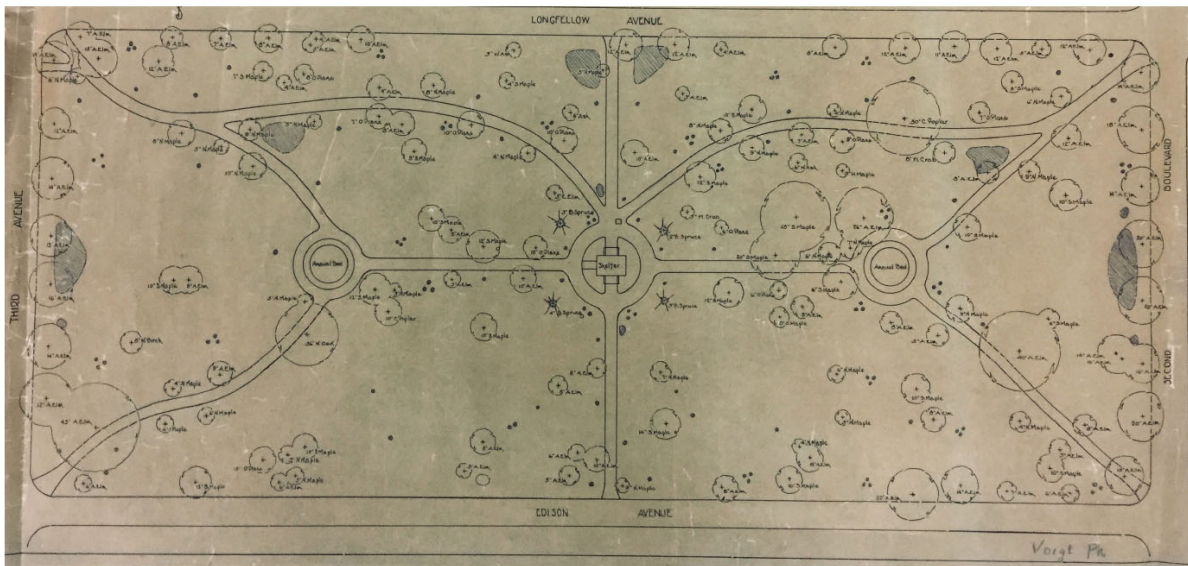
- Install a network of paved concrete pathways to recreate much of the early 20th-century layout
- Install two (2) concrete pads at center of park for previously approved benches
- Install four (4) trash receptacles on 4’ x 4’ concrete pads at approach paths from corners
- Remove two (2) dead trees and grind stumps

Per GSD staff clarification, the restoration of the pathways is to occur in two distinct phases, with the easternmost segment at 2nd (depicted as shaded in the plan below) constructed first. **GSD has clarified that the current application in front of the HDC for review is for the entire path layout that approximates the c. 1927 plan.** Both the concrete paths and the pads are proposed to be executed in an ornamental “aggregate finish” concrete treatment.

PROPOSED PATH PLAN

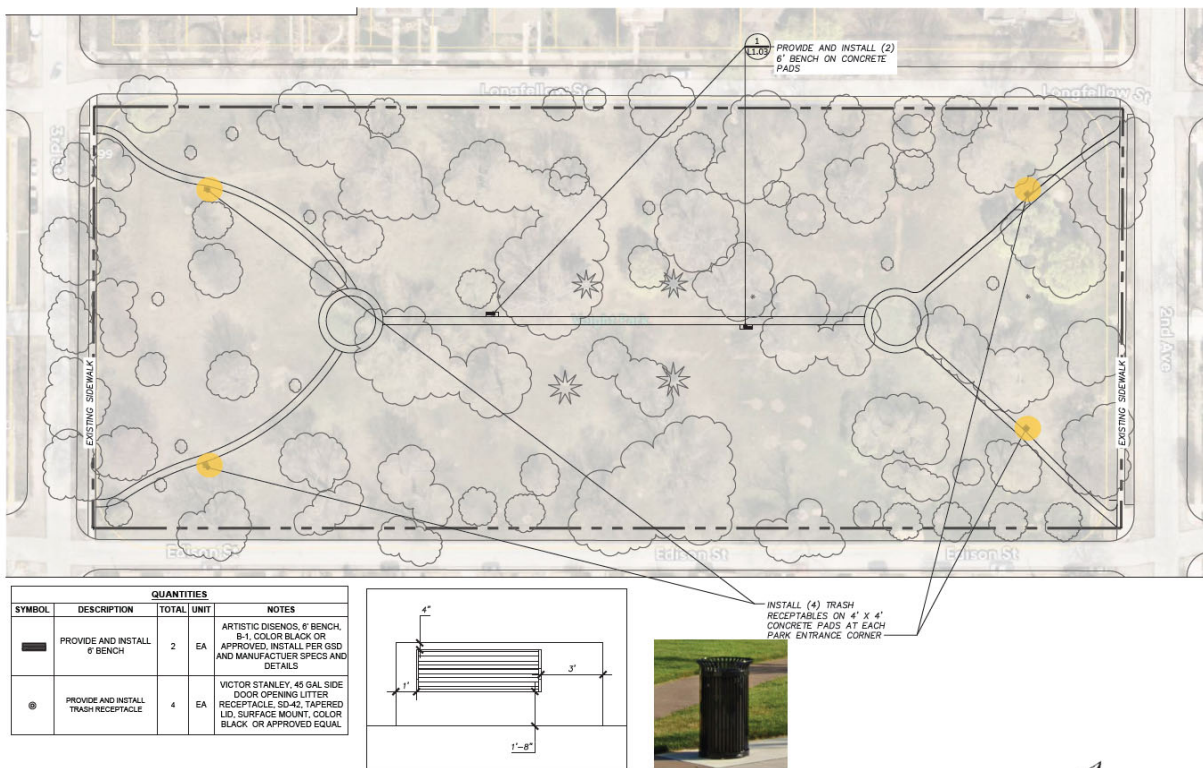


Site plan from submitted materials, as updated October 1st. Note the two phases of path installation, and also the benches and their concrete pads in the center of the park.



The circa 1920s plan upon which the current layout is partially based.

PROPOSED TRASH RECEPTACLES



Site plan from submitted materials, as updated October 1st. Trash receptacles on concrete pads are proposed near the corners of the park, alongside entry approaches.

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Boston-Edison Historic District was enacted on December 31, 1973.
- The National Park Service's National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the Boston-Edison Historic District, filed in 1975, states that its Period of Significance is 1900-1930
- As part of the research for [a previous December 2023 application and staff report](#) in which two benches were approved by this Commission, staff undertook an examination of primary sources (i.e., newspapers including the Detroit Evening Times and the Detroit Free Press) concerning the status and use of Voigt Park during the Period of Significance (1900-1930). This research remains applicable in the current case.
- Staff was surprised at the number of prominent mentions of the Park in a city-wide context. On several occasions, Voigt Park is mentioned in tandem with Clark Park (now in the Hubbard Farms Historic District) as the setting for public band concerts, including on a list of city-wide activities published for the Fourth of July. In one of these cases the event was prominent enough to appear on page 1 of the Detroit Evening Times. In July 1909, a baseball team (Y.M.I., or Young Men's Institute) from Indianapolis played a team from Pittsburg in Voigt Park, a notice of which made it on to the "Sports" page of the city newspaper.
- In 1913, a "street fete" featuring Japanese lanterns and "colored electric lighting" attracted crowds of pedestrians and automobiles. A "band concert and vaudeville numbers were a feature of the entertainment in the park." This event was significant enough to be reported in both the Free Press and the Times, with the former reporting that:

The park grounds were dotted with refreshment stands, candy booths, tents, and all manners of pavilions where almost anything from an ice cream cone to a large handkerchief could be purchased...The fete gave an evening of pleasure to huge crowds of men, women and children, attracted to the scene by the object of the affair and by the glow of the thousands of lights which tinted the sky a warm pink, visible for blocks around.

See the below local newspaper clippings as they outline a sample of events held within Voigt Park during the district's Period of Significance.

SOCIAL and PERSONAL

The street fete given, Thursday evening, on Longfellow and Edison-aves., in the vicinity of Voigt park, under the auspices of Detroit suffragists, was a marked success. The streets, with their beautiful homes and verandas, prettily lighted with colored electric lights and Japanese lanterns, were crowded with pedestrians and automobiles throughout the evening. Musical programs were given on various porches along the streets, and a band concert and vaudeville numbers were features of the entertainment in the park. Pretty booths with attractive girls in charge did a thriving business in light refreshments, flowers, candies and other dainty things. Little boxes which were passed among the crowds, held many coins before the fete was over. The money will be divided between the Bay Court Convalescent home and the suffrage campaign fund.

TODAY'S CONCERTS IN CLARK AND VOIGT PARKS

Schmeman's Military band, Herman W. Schmeman director, renders the following program in Clark park this afternoon, beginning at 2:30, and in Voigt park this evening at 8 o'clock:

March, "Bulgarian" (Strauss); overture, "Jolly Robbers" (Suppe); light opera, "The Fortune Teller" (Herbert); waltzes, "On the Beautiful Rhine" (Keler-Bela); grand selection from "Rigoletto" (Verdi); Spanish serenade, "La Paloma" (Yradler); gems from "Sweethearts" (Herbert); intermezzo, "Cavalleria Rusticana" (Mascagni); "Star Spangled Banner."

FOURTH OF JULY AMUSEMENTS FOR DETROITERS.

Celebration by North Woodward avenue residents, speeches, parade and fireworks.
Grand parade, speechmaking and fireworks display on Warren avenue west in charge of the West Warren Residents' association.

Fireworks at D. A. C. grounds in the evening.
Church of the Blessed Sacrament holds celebration afternoon and evening at Voigt's park, Second avenue and Boston boulevard.
Concerts at the public parks.
Concerts at Electric park, Wolff's park and other resorts at the entrance of Belle Isle bridge.

Special musical programs and dinners at the clubhouses along Lake St. Clair, St. Clair river, Detroit river, and hotels on the inland lakes within easy trolley ride of the city.

Steamer lines out of Detroit offer a tempting array of trips for today and tomorrow. The rates are "right," and in some cases are effective for several days. The schedule includes the following:

D. & C. and D. & B. lines—To Buffalo and Niagara Falls, to Cleveland, to Put-in-Bay and Cleveland (day trip), to Toledo, to St. Clair and Port Huron, Lake Huron shore points and Straits of Mackinac.

White Star line—To Flats, Tashmoo park, Port Huron and away ports; to Sugar Island park and Toledo; moonlight to the Flats.

D. B. I. & W. Ferry Co.—Frequent trips to Bois Blanc park during day and evening of July 4th; usual service to Belle Isle park.

Ashley & Dustin—Steamer Frank E. Kirby to Put-in-Bay. Good music will be a feature on most of the steamers, and travelers by water are assured of everything that makes for a healthful combination of pleasure and recreation.

The railroads also offer inducements to those who wish to be with friends in other cities on this day. The Michigan Central makes a fare and a third to all points in the state and a fare plus 50 cents to the northern resorts. The Wabash offers a fare and a third to Chicago and the Pere Marquette also announces a fare and a third rate.

3 — FRIDAY, JULY 25, 1930

RECREATION BAND CONCERT

The recreation department band will play at Voigt park, Second and Longfellow avenues, Friday at 7:30 p. m. The program follows:

March, "National Emblem"	Bagley
Waltz, "It Happened in Monterey"	Rose and Wayne
"Glow Worm"	Linke
"Manhattan Beach"	Sousa
Vocal solo, "Dancing with Tears in My Eyes"	Slazinski
Band accompaniment,	
"Nola"	Arndt
"Old-Timers' Waltz"	Lake
"Stein Song"	Brockton
Victor Herbert Hits.	
Tenor solo, "Springtime in the Rockies"	Slazinski
March, "Vienna Forever"	Schrammel
"Four Little Blackbirds"	O'Connor
E. W. KATZ, Conductor.	

Y. M. I. League Games at 9:00.

The Y. M. I. league games, scheduled for Sunday, will be played at 9 o'clock, instead of 10, as heretofore. The Indianapolis team now leads the league with a perfect record and will meet Pittsburg at Voigt park.

- Another through-line of discussion in period sources were the efforts to develop and improve the park:

SEVERAL CITIZENS IN THE VICINITY of Voigt park are complaining about its neglected condition. The park is situated in one of the best residential parts of the city, being bounded by Longfellow, Edison, Second and Third avenues. At the city hall it is said the time to have made protests effectual was when the common council and the board of estimates were considering the park commission budget. The commission was allowed \$1,000 a year ago and spend \$800 for water pipes, sewers, walks and tree planting. One of the complaints is that the trenches for the drains are still open and that the sidewalk material is lying in heaps. At the park commission office it was declared yesterday that the balance of \$200 was not sufficient to complete any part of the work and that for that reason no contract was entered into.

Residents of Parkhill subdivision, that part of the city lying between Taylor-ave. and Glyn-ct., will meet in the North Congregation church next Monday night to form an improvement association. One of the first things to be taken up is the improvement of Voigt park. Residents assert that the park has been shamefully neglected, and is now almost in a state of nature. Last summer cattle were herded there.

TO SEEK IMPROVEMENT OF VOIGT PARK

The need of improvement in Voigt park, which lies west of Woodward-ave. in the northern end of the city, was discussed in a meeting of residents of that neighborhood held in the North Congregational church, Woodward and Blaine-aves., Monday evening. Frank W. Blair presided.

It was decided to ask for an appropriation of \$5,000 to conduct the work, Secretary M. P. Hurlbut, of the park department, stating that this would be enough to do the necessary work. A committee headed by David B. Stewart was chosen to push the project and see that the wants of the district are given proper consideration by the board of estimates.

Those present in the meeting decided to ask the North Woodward improvement association to extend its boundaries so as to take in more territory on the western side of the avenue.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE URGES VOIGT PARK AS MEMORIAL HALL SITE

To the Editor: May one who has given the subject of the location of Memorial hall a considerable amount of study suggest a site which will eliminate the question of expending a great portion of the fund for land purchase and save it to the citizens?

The site which I suggest is in the center of Voigt park, bounded by Second, Third, Edison and Longfellow avenues.

This property is now owned by the city. Its use for park purposes will not be destroyed. A great area will remain for such use, forming at once an appropriate setting for Memorial hall and still being available for the use of the public for the recreational purposes to which it is now put. Voigt park is really a breathing spot, not used for formal games, and as such would be ornamented by Memorial hall.

The use of a public park for such public purposes is not without precedent in Detroit. The square on which the old public library now stands and which the board of education building is to occupy, was once East park. Old Central High

ARCHITECTS A. W. CHITTENDEN and Charles Kottling have submitted to Park Commissioner Hurlbut a design for a shelter station in Voigt park, for which the board of estimates appropriated \$1,800 last spring. The plan calls for a structure of classical architecture, 60x12 feet. The design will be submitted to the new city plan and improvement commission. It will be the first definite project of the kind to come before the new commission.

- The early 20th century activities and plans for Voigt Park are consistent with recent scholarship concerning the evolution of urban parks in American cities. Landscape and parks historian Alan Tate, writing in *Environment and History* in February 2018, summarizes the evolution of urban park design that shows “a transition from early [19th century] pastoral models, via form-driven Beaux-Arts and City Beautiful models, to [20th century] function-driven modernist approaches...these approaches to the design of urban parks reflect changes in the social and political purposes for which they were intended, evolving from being seen as escapes from infernal cities, then as places for active physical recreation.” From the various clues offered by contemporary sources here in Detroit, staff argues that Voigt Park was developed as a thoroughly 20th century park, aligned with the modernist aspirations of Detroit’s professional and business class who flocked to what later would be known as Boston-Edison, and that Voigt Park would have been unlikely to be designed or used exclusively as a pastoral or passive space during the district’s Period of Significance.
- In contrast, the *current non-historic* condition of Voigt Park is a passive space that cannot support active use for all persons, due to the lack of ADA-accessible pathways. The park features only loose plastic trash barrels, dog bag stations, and four (4) “historic-style” reproduction light fixtures. GSD states that the current application is “intended to enhance the existing use of the park and provide more opportunities for enjoyment and social interaction in the park.”
- In addition to the various public events described in accounts during the park’s Period of Significance, Voigt Park is mentioned hundreds of times in period real estate listings and reporting, as a major attraction for what was originally described by developers as the exclusive “Park Hill” neighborhood. Properties fronting on Voigt Park were invariably highlighted as being desirable.
- Inasmuch as the Park, at designation in 1974 and in the years since, was increasingly devoid of active use infrastructure and correspondingly limited to passive uses, staff assesses that this situation was a result of decades of post-war disinvestment in urban parks (also well-documented in scholarship), and not a significant historical (1900-1930, in this case) characteristic or feature that needs to be perpetuated and preserved, at least under the historic preservation standards binding on this Commission. In any case, the condition of the park (or any resource in any of our districts) at time of designation is not relevant for an understanding of historic significance. Designation merely establishes the surviving historic materials that date to the Period of Significance. The Commission’s role, writ large, is to **manage change** so that such surviving historic character is not destroyed, and that extant historic elements that express the resource or

district's Period of Significance are preserved in this context of useful modern changes and updates allowing historic properties to serve today's citizens and their contemporary expectations; the Commission's role is not to freeze the district to the condition it was at designation, or its current condition, **but to allow desired changes to proceed, excepting only those that are demonstrably at odds with the significant historic character established in connection with the Period of Significance.**

- It is indisputable that Voigt Park's *current status* is that of a sleepy neighborhood green space little known outside of Boston-Edison. It certainly has taken a markedly different path than Clark Park, its erstwhile companion in the period newspaper accounts, which is now chock-a-block with playgrounds, athletic fields, and an ice rink that welcomes visitors from all over the city. Perhaps a more directly comparable example, the neighborhood-focused Mollicone Park in the Indian Village Historic District, was in recent years compatibly altered with intensive, active uses approved by this Commission, including a playground, multiple benches, picnic tables, and even a small sledding hill. That neighborhood historic resource, until the approved alterations, also sat unused and gave the impression of a passive, "naturalistic" park, though such a current-day reading was not consistent with its historic character. At one time, per staff's observation, the grass at that park was two feet high and no doubt supported a very healthy natural ecosystem. But this was not its historic character. The same is true in this case.
- It thus remains the opinion of professional staff that a passive and pastoral Voigt Park with almost no permanent infrastructure is simply not an authentic historic condition that requires protection and preservation by this Commission. We cannot speak, of course, for other city and neighborhood policies that may direct its future, outside of the jurisdiction of this body. But as to historic character, modest improvements such as the current application will not be problematic. Nor, in staff's opinion, would the development of additional public amenities be necessarily precluded, a professional historic preservation opinion that PDD-HP staff has discussed with GSD over the last several years and reinforces today.
- Staff notes that GSD proposes aggregate concrete for the paths in Voigt Park. A central tenet of historic preservation in a rehabilitation context is the careful improvement of buildings and landscapes for reasonable modern use while preserving important elements and character. Technical and financial feasibility are relevant. No one (or almost no one) would insist that the various streets, sidewalks, or driveways in our historic districts should be returned to stone slabs, wood planks, gravel paths, or other loose paving materials used a century or more ago, excepting very limited areas (brick streets/alleys) that have survived *authentically intact*. Just as these infrastructure elements in our districts accommodate modern users (including of course, wheelchair users, ubiquitous baby strollers, and children on bikes or roller skates), paths and elements proposed for city parks can and should reasonably accommodate such a diversity of users by being created with modern pavements compatible with historic contexts. Loose paving materials such as crushed stone may be appropriate for private gardens, but are difficult for non-ambulatory and wheelchair-dependent users, may not conform to modern ADA standards unless carefully constructed with stabilizing binders, and may present challenges with snow removal and other basic maintenance, curtailing year-round enjoyment of park spaces. Staff therefore questions whether aggregate concrete is the most practical and reasonable choice for a public park that should welcome all users, given that aggregate surfaces exhibit a rougher rolling surface and are harder to keep clear of ice, according to engineering guidance previously given to HDC staff from the Department of Public Works (DPW). The DPW generally prohibits such ornamental concrete from public sidewalks, excepting certain accent areas, but has no jurisdiction within GSD-managed parks. Though not *inappropriate*, in staff's opinion, neither is the exposed aggregate finish *required* for historic compatibility.
- As to the layout itself, GSD has designed it to pick up on some elements of the c. 1927 layout per the image included above. Some secondary pathways, and the circular pathway at center around the former park shelter are not included. Noting that recreation or restoration of a lost historic feature is never required by NPS Standards and Guidelines applicable to Michigan local historic districts, staff assesses that the proposed layout is reasonable and compatible for a historic neighborhood park, especially so (but not based on) its resemblance to a historic-age design at this location.
- The designs proposed for the benches and trash receptacles are compatible for a historic park.

- In the district's Elements of Design, Voigt Park's features are referenced in the following elements:
 - **Element 13, Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments.** *The Public Lighting Commission's ornamental poles ("O.P.") with cast iron bases (Pattern #10 and Cast Iron Panel Pattern #16A) and wooden shafts are placed at regular intervals primarily on the medians on Boston Boulevard and Chicago Boulevard, and on the tree lawns on other east-west streets. Lighting on the north-south side streets consists of steel poles, some of which are fluted, with either ornate pendants or simple cranes. There are historic upright poles along the periphery of Voigt Park. Concrete and brick entrance piers exist at Woodward Avenue and Longfellow Street.*
 - Staff note: The original PLC (Bishop style) poles were unfortunately replaced in Boston-Edison during the first decade of the 21st century. In 2024, the Commission approved a more compatible replacement for general use in several districts, including Boston-Edison.
 - **Element 14, Relationship of open space to structures.** *Open space in the district occurs in the form of vacant land, a City park, side lots, and grassy median strips in the boulevards. There are no houses facing Woodward Avenue. Ample open space is provided at Woodward Avenue and Boston Boulevard, creating a park-like entrance into the district. The John C. Lodge Freeway is depressed and forms a visual and physical gap in the district. All houses have rear yards as well as front yards. Where an original or early arrangement of house and grounds included, and still includes, landscaped lots which form part of the landscaping plan for the residence, such landscaped lots have significant landscape features.*
 - Staff note: The character and use of open space in a city park is fundamentally different than open space used to form medians in boulevards. Parks are meant to be used and visited, medians are meant to be viewed.
 - **Element 22, General environmental character.** *The Boston-Edison District, with its long straight streets, two boulevards, large-to-moderate-sized, stately single-family homes, and Voigt Park and Woodward Avenue's open space, has an urban, substantial, low density residential character.*
- Staff assesses that the significant historic character of Voigt Park is its tree canopy and open space, with such open space primarily but not exclusively dedicated to lawn and planting beds. These features must be preserved in any rehabilitation design, in staff's opinion, but may be combined with new amenities and elements to the extent that the general sense of openness and tree canopy is preserved. Staff further assesses that the historic use, based on the research described above, was as an active park that welcomed active uses.

ISSUES

- None. Staff finds that the installation of a paved pathway network and provision of concrete pads for benches and trash receptacles is compatible and historically appropriate under National Park Service Guidelines and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, as it does not destroy any distinctive character-defining features, and the historic character and use of the park is preserved and retained.

RECOMMENDATION

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

Staff recommends that the proposed work should qualify for a Certificate of Appropriateness, as it meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and the Boston-Edison Historic District's Elements of Design.