STAFF REPORT: 11/12/2025 REGULAR MEETING **PREPARED BY**: A. DYE
APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00575
ADDRESS: 2733 SECOND AVENUE (AKA CASS PARK)
HISTORIC DISTRICT: CASS PARK LOCAL
APPLICANT: JULIANA FULTON, GENERAL SERVICES DEPT. (GSD), CITY OF DETROIT
PROPERTY OWNER: CITY OF DETROIT
DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 09/15/2025
DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 09/25/2025

SCOPE: ALTER & REHABILITATE PARK, REVISE INTERNAL PATH LAYOUT

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Cass Park is a 1.1-acre 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. Most 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.

The north- and south-central entrances align with Second Avenue, before the street splits to travel around the park as one-way, north-south streets. The Robert Burns statue at the north-central entrance, and the Cass Park sign and set of three (3) flags at the south-central entrance align with Second Avenue, offering a striking visual and physical connection to the north and south as well as directly through the park.

Top left: View looking northeast, from the center of the park. Masonic Temple is visible in the background. Staff photo, September 25, 2025.

Above: Aerial view of the park looking southeast. ConnectExplorer, 2024.

Bottom left: Front of Robert Burns monument that faces Second and Temple Streets).

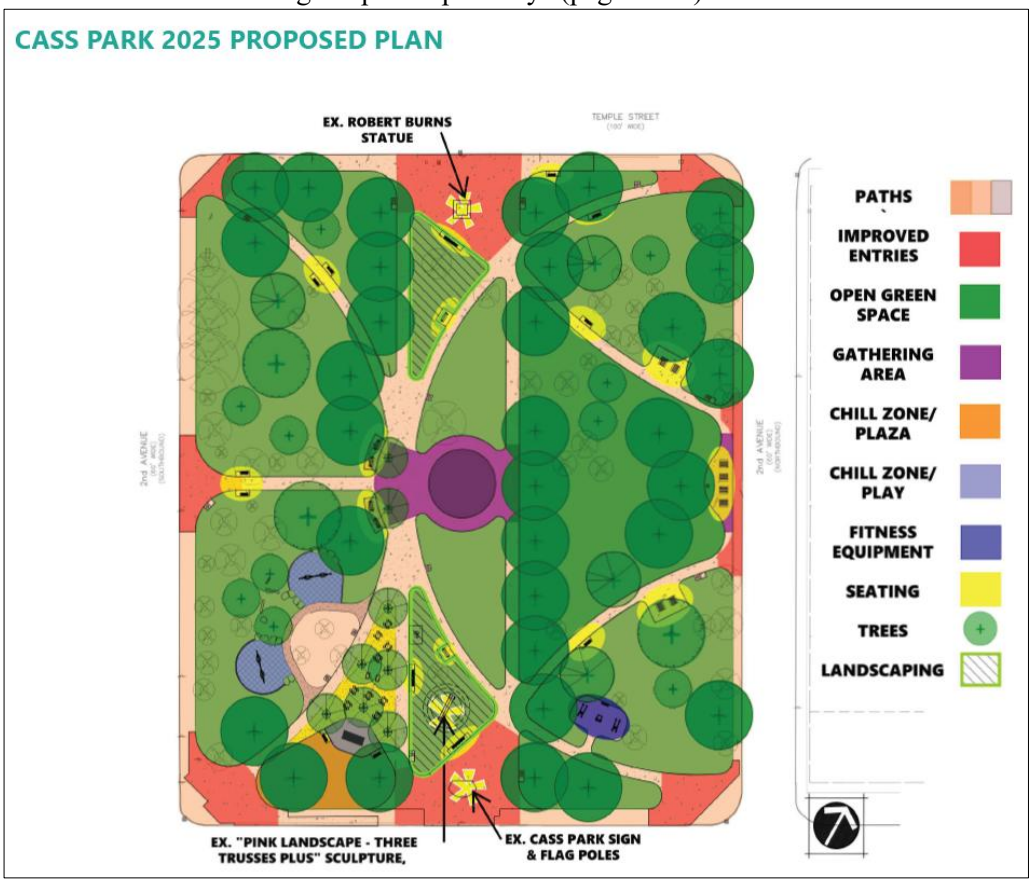
Bottom center: Front of current Cass Park monument with sign and flagpoles that faces Second and Ledyard Streets).

PROPOSAL

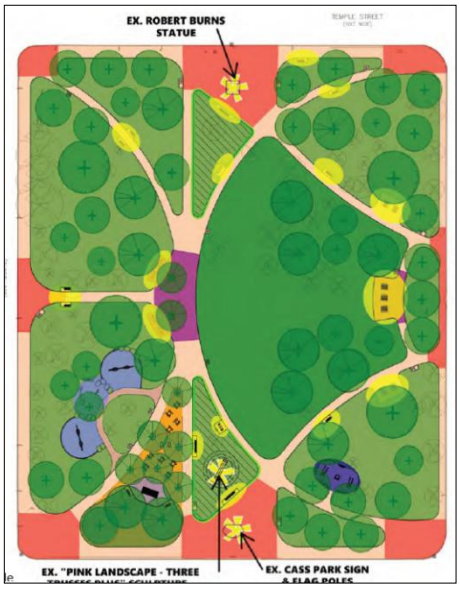
Alterations and rehabilitation of the park, according to the submitted documents and drawings state the proposed work items include the installation of walkways in a revised layout; removal of invasive trees and planting of additional trees; installation of play elements, benches and picnic tables; and the replacement of fitness equipment. Work is scheduled to take place in Spring 2026.

The current application is a revision to the previous design, in reaction to the discussion and Notice of Denial issued after the Commission's August 2025 review. The applicant states the changes to the proposal include:

- Instead of one primary off-center pathway, the proposal now includes two symmetrical pathways that extend from 2nd Avenue through the park (pages A-10 and A-14).
- An avenue of trees that flanks the two symmetrical pathways through the park was enhanced, to emphasize the view down 2nd Avenue through the park, which was referenced in the historic significance considerations (page A-23).
- The large lawn space was reduced to accommodate the symmetrical paths (page A-15). To maximize the remaining lawn space for programming the mid-block plaza off east 2nd Ave was condensed, while retaining the function needed for the food service program (pages A-16 and A-20).
- A central focal point was added that is in the exact center of the park, referencing the historic fountain area, and connecting the park's pathways (page A-16).



Applicant rendering of proposed design.



Applicant's previous park proposal, HDC2025-00489.

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.
- Within 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 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).

1952 DTE aerial photo.

North

Current conditions via Google earth.

- 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 on 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.

- Staff acknowledges the addition of north-south paths at a dimensional spacing that is in keeping with the width of Second Avenue's north-south axis. The revision of tree placement at those paths will further strengthen that vista from within and outside of the park.
- The inclusion of a circular feature creates an identifiable central element akin to the original placement of the 19th century fountain. Currently identified to be a grassy gathering area, it creates a prominent space which also allows for the future inclusion of a fountain or other physical/visual "destination" component.

Existing conditions

Applicant rendering of proposed design.

- However, taking into account the district's Elements of Design and the park's level of integrity, it is staff's opinion that the proposed overall layout is still not an appropriate park plan as it will destroy the symmetrical design of eight entries converging on the center of the park from each corner and center of the four sides, which is significant and distinctive character-defining feature of the park, and the one element that has essentially remained unchanged from the original 1860 park design.

ISSUES

- 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 distinctly characterize the property and are further codified in the Elements of Design.
- 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 1, 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 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 distinctly characterize the property and are further codified in the Elements of Design.
- 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.