

Voice Column for August 2019

Davis Park gets a makeover

By John Groh

Drumroll, please. It's time to take a look at the refreshed and renewed Davis Park.

If you've not seen the park since the Rockford Sharefest makeover of this 5 ½-acre riverfront space in downtown Rockford, now's the time. You'll be impressed.

As usual, volunteers for Sharefest, which is based out of Heartland Community Church, took on a monumental task and achieved phenomenal results. What volunteers and Sharefest leaders really did, I believe, was envision the park for what it can and will become. By doing so, they tipped the next domino that needed to fall to achieve synergy with the adjacent Embassy Suites project that is transforming the old Amerock Building.

They got Davis Park ready for company, so to speak. The next domino that needs to fall is creation of activities and attractions to make the space a daily and year-round destination for residents and visitors. Leading the way to make that happen is the job of the Davis Park Task Force, which was created last year by Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara. He believes, and I agree, that this space is key to the long-term growth and success of downtown.

In 2018, McNamara appointed me to lead the Task Force, and since then, we've been exploring ways to realize a visionary master plan (created during Mayor Larry Morrissey's tenure) that will make Davis Park a beloved and well-used landmark destination along Rockford's downtown riverfront. The master plan contains elements such as a climbing wall, an ice rink, water features in the summer, a sculpture walk, gathering spaces, food vendors and much more. You'll be hearing more about the Task Force's progress in the coming months.

For years, Davis Park and the dilapidated Amerock building mirrored mutual neglect. The dilapidated 13-story structure cast a negative shadow over the park's potential, and the underused, poorly maintained acreage along the riverfront did nothing to inspire action on the abandoned factory.

Now, with construction underway on the hotel and conference center, it was time for renewed attention to the adjacent park. Enter Sharefest.

Over about a week in June, scores of volunteers removed unnecessarily restrictive fencing, painted benches, light poles and railings and landscaped numerous large areas, which involved putting in 4,555 plants and cleaning up weedy, overgrown spaces. They spruced up the gazebo, which is close to the new skate park, and mulched around all the trees. Thanks to the City of Rockford for sending its forestry staff to trim and tend the trees. The results are fantastic.

Now, the park needs to be used. A series of events called "Summer at Davis Park" will make that happen. Our goal for this series of free events is to reintroduce local residents to Davis Park and bring energy and excitement to the space. Here's what we're planning:

Workout Wednesdays, featuring high-energy music and exercise led by fitness instructors from the YMCA of Rock River Valley, will occur on six consecutive Wednesdays beginning July 24. Workout instruction will take place from 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. each Wednesday on RACVB's mobile airstream stage.

A kids zone, with activities for children 5-12, is being planned by the Rockford Park District's Youth Sports Department.

Music at Davis Park, featuring a selection of diverse music, live bands and performers, is scheduled for 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. every Thursday in August. Concerts are free and open to the community. Food and beverage trucks, along with local vendors, will be on site.

Make a note to celebrate Rockford Day at Davis Park on Aug. 15. Los Arenales & DJ Cachorro headline the Thursday concert that day, and RACVB staff will be there with some special activities.

For more information about scheduled events, go to gorockford.com/summeratdavispark. And, special thanks to the River District Association and Project First Rate for their sponsorship support of Summer at Davis Park.

Davis Park is poised for the future. This is only the beginning.

John Groh is president/CEO of Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau and also serves as chair of the Davis Park Taskforce. The mission of RACVB is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development. www.gorockford.com

The views expressed are Groh's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.