



**TOWN OF ACTON  
DESIGN REVIEW BOARD**

Review Memorandum: Gardner Field & Playground Renovation  
Acton Town Hall  
September 13, 2023

DRB Members in attendance: Peter Darlow, (Chair), David Honn, Holly Ben-Joseph, Tom Doolittle, Dean Charter, (Selectboard liaison)

Proponents in attendance: Ron Headrick and Jamie Falise (GPI Incorporated, Landscape architects for the project)

Town of Acton Representatives: David Martin and Fran Arsenault, Select Board Members (BOS); Corey York Department of Public Works Director (DPW)

Citizens in attendance: none

Documents Reviewed:

Plans Titled Gardner Field & Playground Renovation

- Site Furnishings Plan dated 7/5/2023
- Planting Plan dated 7/5/2023
- Photographs of site by DRB members

This project is substantially complete, with all the playground equipment, amphitheater seating, surfacing and parking installed. DRB members previously met out at the project site to review the amphitheater seating which was brought up as a violation by the Historic District Commission (HDC). The HDC issued a violation letter to the Town dated July 24, 2023. At this meeting we discussed with the designers and Town staff the design and construction of the project. The following are the DRB's observations and suggestions on how to improve the elements of the playground:

- DRB members all agreed that the amphitheater seating is out of character for West Acton and has a 'city look and scale'. The blocks on the west leg of the U are most visible from Mass. Ave and are the most concerning to the HDC, suggestions for improvement will follow.
- The amphitheater seating is constructed of concrete retaining units, each level consisting of a 24" height base block, capped by a 12" height top cap. The units are placed together without the use of mortar in the joints.

- The block's finish is not ideal for seating. Many of the edges are rough and air pockets are abundant on the visible surfaces.
- At the east and west ends of the U the blocks are taller than they need to be and could be removed.
  - The DRB recommends grinding/sanding all the rough edges of the blocks and either painting the blocks (grey color) or applying a parging cement finish.
  - It was suggested by the designers and DRB members to add wood benches in certain areas could make for more comfortable seating and also break up the scale of the walls. The benches could be without backs.
  - The DRB recommends removing about half of the blocks from the west side of the U where they are not retaining, and gently grading the slope down to the playground.
  - Add planting along the top edge of the walls to conceal the top layer of block. Either clinging vines or drooping groundcover or shrubs could work.
- The total height difference of the blocks from top to bottom exceeds 30" which is the height that triggers the requirement of guardrails according to the building code.
  - The DRB recommends adding a guardrail along the top of the seating. A single pipe-rail powder coated black would work, it would also complement the black metal of the proposed entry arch.
- The screening trees along the east property were removed for construction, and condominium building on the east property line no longer has screening of the playground. It was noted that the condominium owners are very displeased with the loss of their privacy and are anticipating that mitigating screening measures will be implemented by the Town.
  - The DRB suggests adding columnar planting along the west edge to add back screening. Possible trees suggested are: Eastern Red Cedar and hedge maple (acer campestre).
  - Several large boulders are placed at the front corner nearest to the condominiums. The DRB suggests relocating the boulders and adding additional plantings. A large shade tree was removed from this corner. The DRB endorses the landscape plan which replants a substantial shade tree in this location.
- The rubberized surfacing stops short of the seating at the west leg of the U. The area is planted with grass. Because this will likely be a high traffic area, the DRB predicts that the grass will not survive.

The DRB recommends continuing the rubberized surfacing to the seating blocks (as is done around the rest of the U); alternatively, hardscaping this area is recommended.

- The Site Furnishings Plan shows the amphitheater seating with a rounded corner at the main entrance to the park. The rounded corner is bisected by a set of stairs leading directly from the street into the playground area. The rounded seating corner has been squared off (due to use of the concrete blocks) and the stairs were eliminated.
  - The DRB discussed re-adding the stairs in two locations. One suggestion is to add stairs at the end of the shortened U blocks. It could be constructed from either granite or formed concrete. Handrails would be required.

- Another possible location is at the corner, approximately where it is shown on the drawings. This location would require redesigning the access to the water fountain.
- The DRB recommends removing the existing low wood border located at the top of the concrete amphitheater seating. If a new railing is added, this is no longer functional.
- The Site Furnishings Plan shows a walk along the top of the concrete amphitheater that provides access to a bench and drinking fountain, it stops in a dead end.
  - The DRB discussed continuing the path toward the east and connecting back up to the sidewalk. This would provide a path that would invite passing pedestrians to detour closer to the park.
  - Another suggestion for this area is to revise the planting so that it mimics the planting on the other side of Mass Ave (the planting in front of the True West complex). The complementary planting would signal an entry into the West Acton village through uniform planting.
- If additional picnic benches are added the DRB recommends locating them within the park and not on the upper level near the road.
- No bike parking is shown on the plan other than the bike-share parking at the street which is currently abandoned.
  - The DRB recommends adding a bike rack within the park, near the benches and picnic table off of the parking lot.
- An existing, mature sugar maple stands at the bottom of the new driveway into the park. Dean Charter (arborist) mentioned that sugar maples are sensitive to salts.
  - The DRB suggests limiting the amount of salt used on the drive in the winter (if the parking will even be plowed).
- An existing chain link fence extends around the back and sides of the park, it is in poor condition with holes and damage caused by falling tree limbs. The east side of the fence stops about halfway along the concrete seating.
  - If within budget, the DRB recommends replacing the existing fence with a new vinyl-coated (black) fence. If that is not possible, replacing the fence from the parking lot up to the street. A four-foot fence height is recommended.
- The metal slide is facing SW and will get burning hot in the summer and on hot, sunny days.
  - The DRB recommends adding a structure that will shade the slide.

The DRB would like to thank the DPW director and Select Board members, and the landscape architects for attending this very informative and positive meeting to discuss the park. The DRB will fully support this new playground and park if the suggested recommendations are acted upon, especially in regard to reducing and modifying the amphitheater seating and screening of the condominium building to the east.

Respectfully submitted,

The DRB