

FEATURES

Ruby Hill Park Getting Ready to Shine

VIC VELA | WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 02, 2013



The picnic pavillion was part of the first phase of the park's improvement projects.

KARA PEARSON GWINN

Welcome to Ruby Hill. The long underused city park is going through an extreme, culturally infused **makeover** that is expected to turn it into a Denver gem. It's quite a turnaround for a former landfill with a considerably lower profile than many other parks in the city.

In the latter half of the 1800s, miners would camp alongside the South Platte River, on high ground about five miles south of what is now known as downtown Denver. Instead of gold, they would often come across red-hued gems during their extraction efforts.

The area was named after the gems' bright coloring, taking on the name of Ruby Hill -- never mind that the minerals found were actually garnets.

Today the area's landmark is **Ruby Hill Park**, an impressive piece of land that's always had plenty of possibilities, but is hardly considered by folks outside of Denver -- or even by those who live here -- to be one of the city's top parks, if they know it exists at all.

But Ruby Hill's time to shine may finally be upon us. Nowadays, one could argue that the park is getting more attention than it ever has received before, even more than it did during the mining period generations ago.

The City of Denver is in the process of reinventing Ruby Hill Park as a potential companion to

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the nearby and uber-popular Washington Park. It started with the modest addition of a new pavilion, playground equipment and picnic tables, but the project will soon culminate in the creation of an urban mountain bike course and an amphitheater with capacity for 7,500 concert-goers.

So the city has big plans for Ruby Hill Park, a long-underused 80-acre gem that the Parks and Recreation Department sees as a diamond in the rough.

"Once we get this all built, I think it's going to be a big hit and a big success," says Kent Sondgerath, Senior Landscape Architect and Project Manager for the [Denver Parks and Recreation Department](#).

The park nobody knows

The [Ruby Hill neighborhood](#) is bounded by South Federal Boulevard, South Platte River Drive, West Mississippi Avenue and West Jewell Avenue.

Its centerpiece, Ruby Hill Park, has been around since the mid-1950s. It has 80 acres of green grass to play on and its elevated position above the city offers one of the most serene and panoramic views of the Denver skyline and the Rocky Mountains in all of town.

But if you've never known any of that, you shouldn't feel too bad, because you're not alone.

"We were walking around Washington Park one day, talking to people about the city's plans for Ruby Hill Park," Sondgerath says. "Probably about 85 percent of the people we talked to had never heard of Ruby Hill, and it's only a couple of miles away from Wash Park."

The folks at Washington Park whom Sondgerath spoke with weren't the only ones who had never heard of Ruby Hill Park. Even those who are now playing a pivotal role in the park's make-over had to do a little bit of research.

"When I first heard someone mention Ruby Hill Park, I said, 'Where's that?'" says Chris Zacher, CEO and executive director for Levitt Pavilion Denver, the name of the amphitheater that will open in Ruby Hill Park in 2016. "I don't think that people realize that it's not much smaller than Wash Park. It's a big, big park that nobody knows about."

The area has an interesting history. Aside from once being a mining hub, the park's bluff had once been used by Native Americans as a lookout point. Then there's the part of the area's history that has posed challenges to the city, such as the fact that Ruby Hill served as a landfill in the decades that preceded it becoming a park. The landfill debris led to asbestos being found in the park's irrigation system, which has proven to be a costly hang-up for improvement projects.

But the asbestos-plagued landfill that the park once was is a distant memory. And, pretty soon, park-goers won't even be able to recognize it.



The picnic pavillion was part of the first phase of the park's improvement projects.

partnered with the Parks and Recreation Department and other entities to launch the rail

The phases of Ruby

The initial driver of Ruby Hill Park's revitalization efforts turned out to be the success of the [Ruby Hill Rail Yard](#), the country's first winter urban terrain park. The rail yard opened in 2007 and has become a huge hit with the community.

The rail yard's success made it a model for other cities that teamed up with ski resorts for similar collaborations around the country, according to Winter Park Resorts, which



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"They had a problem with a park or a problem getting people to a park," he says.

Sondgerath says work on the amphitheater is scheduled to begin by either late next year or the early part of 2015, with the first concerts expected to be held in 2016.

Phase three will cost \$4 million, with there being "a fifty-fifty split" in funding between the city and the Levitt Foundation.

"Our hope is that people see that as a great venue," Sondgerath says. "There's not a single outdoor permanent venue within ten miles of downtown Denver, other than the Greek Amphitheater at Civic Center Park.

With all of these new additions coming to Ruby Hill Park, it's no wonder that the people involved in its revitalization efforts are starting to get excited.

"During public meetings over last couple months, a lot of people have said that ever since the improvements started, they see a lot less issues of vandalism; before that, it was a constant problem," Sondgerath says. "We want people to see that were trying to make it a better place so they want to take care of it too, take pride in in and get some of that bad behavior out of there."

Ruby Hill Park will always hold a special place for Holme, who grew up in Littleton and who remembers sledding there when he was a boy. He's appreciative of the positive changes that are coming to Ruby Hill.

"For a city to be as progressive as Denver has been, and to open their arms to new ideas, it really speaks volumes," Holme says. "That park is going to go from something that's already special into a jewel of the city."



Read more articles by [Vic Vela](#).

Vic Vela is the legislative reporter for Colorado Community Media. He has also covered crime for the *Albuquerque Journal* and is a reformed television news and sports reporter.

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Victoria Cornell
I have lived in Ruby Hill Park for 26 years and I am a Parks and Rec volunteer in Sanderson Gulch, Godsman and Ruby Hil area. This will be a huge change and probably the biggest change the neighborhood has seen since I've lived here. I cant wait for this time next year when the multi use trail gets built and is ready for use. But it will be bittersweet because it is so tranquil now. I urge everyone to watch the park change, to use it and to attend and comment at any public forums inviting comment because we are the parks.
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