

## From Wishful Thinking to Manifest Reality: Cheesman Park's Reincarnation

by DeAnne Minner

For decades, parks and recreation amenities in Capitol Hill were allowed to languish. Denver's Parks and Recreation department focused on other areas of the city, leaving Cheesman Park's 80.7 acres of open space vulnerable to the deterioration and disrespect that accompany neglect. Perpetually deferred maintenance saw fountains stop flowing, a rustic shelter crumble, and running trails turn into deeply eroded inclines and muddy puddles. Inappropriate, if not criminal, behaviors were overlooked for so long that many considered the park deviant, if not dangerous. Let's face it: Cheesman Park had a reputation, and not the kind you write home about.

Fast forward to 2010. Suddenly, it seems, construction crews are digging up the park. Unbroken stretches of green are dissected by black and orange fencing material. Where grass once grew, ribbons of concrete wind through and around the inner meadow. *The Denver Post* reports that park neighbors are "irked." This appraisal leaves out half the story, however, and that half involves a steadfast group of citizen volunteers and city employees who invested thousands of hours to address a critical need for repairs, renovation and renewal in Cheesman Park.

Rather than "cavalier," construction that seemed to materialize out of nowhere was the culmination of carefully planned events that took shape over the past six years. Strategic highpoints include:

\* In June 2004, District 10 Councilwoman Jeanne Robb hosted a meeting for concerned citizens to brainstorm issues and visions regarding Cheesman Park. Out of this meeting the Cheesman Park Advocacy Group (CPAG) was born. CPAG does what its name suggests – advocates for the interests of the park and its users.

\* In 2005, Denver Parks and Recreation received a grant from the State Historic Fund that provided the basis for funding a new Cheesman Park Master Plan. The City hired Mundus/Bishop, an award-winning planning and landscape architecture firm, and began laying groundwork for an historic landscape assessment, user intercept surveys, transportation activity plan, existing condition assessment, and the public process required to restore Cheesman Park to a former glory so impressive as to merit listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

\* In 2006, Denver Parks and Recreation worked with Mundus/Bishop to conduct interviews with hundreds of park users, hosted at least four public meetings and two park stakeholder meetings, and extensively viewed and reviewed existing landscape, traffic patterns and architecture in the park. CPAG was an integral part of this process and helped hold the City accountable for integrating feedback from users and public meetings into a master plan final product.

\* In 2007, as the planning process moved towards completion, Denver compiled a wish list of citywide improvements to be funded with a bond initiative subsequently approved by voters. Since Cheesman Park had a new Master Plan, proposed improvements could be added to this list. **It is important to note: No money would have been available for improvements to Cheesman Park had this Master Plan not been done. None. Our park would have continued to languish.**

Instead, our park is being reborn. Improvements made possible by the Better Denver Bond Program address four priorities identified in the Cheesman Park Master Plan: pedestrian safety, an improved trail system, a new irrigation system, and repairs to the park's pavilion and fountains. These improvements are described in detail below. Park users should rest assured that damaged lawn or garden areas will be repaired as these projects wrap up.

To ensure a **safer pedestrian experience**, slow traffic, and minimize pedestrian/vehicle conflict, seven raised pedestrian crossing tables, ADA-compliant curb ramps, a speed hump, as well as additional stop signs and crosswalks are being added. All park road entries will have 3-way stops, and trail crossings are being shifted and re-stripped closer to stop signs rather than mid-block. This work began last October and will continue through early summer. The westernmost bus stop and no-parking signs along park road entries will be moved slightly to improve crosswalk visibility. Although the Master Plan recommends closing several auto entrances, this item is not being implemented at this time.

Cheesman's **improved trail system** was designed to offer more variety of recreational uses while meeting ADA requirements. A concrete loop trail, perhaps the most controversial feature, is under construction in the big meadow. This trail design evolved out of and is in keeping with the park's historic character yet offers alternative vistas and routes to park users. Meadow trails bring an added benefit: more eyes on those areas of the park, thus discouraging inappropriate or criminal behaviors. Although trail cutouts are 12' wide, the final trails are 6' wide with 3' transitions on either side. Those disturbed by the use of concrete for trail surfaces are advised that it is cost-effective, durable, and blends in over time. This work will be completed by early summer.

On the south side, the walk along 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue is being upgraded to concrete and moved inward. On the west side where Franklin St. originally cut through the park, two parallel walks lined with linden trees and interspersed benches will create a promenade or *Unter den Linden*. The popular soft-surface running trail around the park perimeter will be upgraded with improvements to alignment and surface materials. Perimeter trail and irrigation construction, described below, are scheduled for late 2010 through spring/summer 2011.

**Cheesman Park's irrigation system** is being entirely replaced. Initial work in the central meadow began in January 2010 and continues through June. This work includes a new irrigation tap, a new mainline, and renovation of the irrigation system throughout the meadow. Portions of the meadow will be closed during construction, but contractors have been advised to arrange schedules so as to minimize impact on park users.

In keeping with Denver's desire to be more "green" environmentally as well as aesthetically, Cheesman's new irrigation system will accommodate both potable and recycled water. Initial operations of the new system will use potable water. Watering windows will be narrower, and greater capacity will be achieved through improved water pressure and efficiencies. Conversion to recycled water will occur in 2012-13 and will be closely monitored to safeguard landscaping features.

Rededication of Cheesman Park's Rustic Shelter, completely and immaculately rebuilt as part of the original State Historic Fund grant, kicked off the master planning process in 2006. Regrettably, vandalism has undone most of that fine work. **Repairs to the park's historic pavilion and fountains** are on the calendar for this year. Pavilion roof repairs are underway and should wrap up this spring. Pavilion structural repairs, recommended in an historic structural assessment and partially funded by a second grant from the State Historic Fund, are projected to begin in September. Repairs to Cheesman's fountains will be made in conjunction with pavilion work.

Councilwoman Jeanne Robb deserves a big vote of thanks for leading the way towards improvements now being made in Cheesman Park. Since hosting that first public meeting in 2004, she and her staff have met regularly with Parks and Recreation employees and CPAG volunteers to breathe new life into the park. During that time, CPAG has evolved from an ad hoc advocacy group into a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Last year CPAG held its first big fundraising event so as to continue advocating for the park and its Master Plan. It ran a smaller fundraiser in concert with Neighbors and Friends for Cheesman

Park that funded the purchase of 100 new sprinkler heads. It sponsored a monthly literacy event for kids, and it has formed two new committees: one to work on the park's perimeter landscaping needs and another to explore amenities and/or programs specifically for children and families.

In addition, recommendations from the 2008 Master Plan have led to the following annual events that are attracting more and more people back into the park:

- Five auto-free days -- the first Sunday of every month from May-September
- A 4<sup>th</sup> of July Kids' Parade, now in its fourth year
- Movie Nights in the Park
- Colorado Symphony Orchestra performance
- Denver Municipal Band performance

For decades, Cheesman Park has patiently waited its turn, and in recent years hundreds of people have worked very hard to shine the spotlight back on Cheesman. That work is finally paying off. These projects are transforming Cheesman from a dark place of dubious repute into a safe park where Capitol Hill residents, big or little, young or old, from all walks of life, can enjoy well-maintained amenities and appreciate a beautiful piece of history that still serves as an oasis in the city. Now, it's a park you can write home about.

*DeAnne Minner serves as secretary on the CPAG Board of Directors. For more information about Cheesman Park and its Master Plan: (1)sign up for Councilwoman Robb's "eTalk in 10" email newsletter (start at [www.denvergov.org](http://www.denvergov.org) and look for City Council; (2)attend a CPAG Board meeting, 4<sup>th</sup> Thursday of the month, Tears McFarlane Annex, or email [CPAG@cheesmanpark.org](mailto:CPAG@cheesmanpark.org); (3)contact Ruth Murayama, Cheesman Park project manager, at 720-913-0613 or [ruth.murayama@denvergov.org](mailto:ruth.murayama@denvergov.org); (4)read the Master Plan at <http://www.denvergov.org/Portals/626/documents/01.Intro.pdf>; or (5)view the final Cheesman Park trail design schematic at [http://www.denvergov.org/Portals/626/documents/CP-Layout1\\_final\\_2-12-10.pdf](http://www.denvergov.org/Portals/626/documents/CP-Layout1_final_2-12-10.pdf).*