

Section One: History 1908 -2018

The Early Years

The Wilmette Park District has come a long way since its first meeting was held February 17, 1908. Louis K. Gillson was elected president of the new five-member Board of Commissioners at that meeting – other members included Rev. Edward J. Vattmann, David Maney, Horace G. Drury and Peter J. Cuneen.

The District was created at the suggestion of Col. Robert McCormick who, in 1907 while serving as president of the Sanitary District of Chicago, noted the excavation of a drainage canal connecting Lake Michigan with the North Branch of the Chicago River would result in about 22 acres of "made land" dumped into Lake Michigan between Washington Avenue and the canal inlet. Under state law, organized park districts could take possession of unoccupied "made land" to be used for park purposes at no cost.

Citizens promptly petitioned for an election to organize a park district. An election was held in January of 1908 and the first Board of Commissioners was designated. Of the 211 votes cast, 174 were in favor of establishing a park district and 37 were against. The District, a distinct and independent municipal body, encompassed the entire Village of Wilmette which had a western boundary at the center line of Ridge Road. A portion of northeast Evanston was also included but later chose to be annexed to Evanston.

The new District immediately set out to acquire the canal's "made land" and established a goal of creating a continuous lakefront park stretching north from the new harbor basin. Although the District did not officially acquire the canal acreage until state legislation was passed on May 25, 1911, a combination of purchases, property condemnations, lease agreements and a gift of land from Northwestern University soon resulted in one nearly continuous stretch of land between Lake Avenue to 70 feet north of Forest Avenue including all riparian rights.

The first park development was begun in 1910 between Lake and Forest Avenues with the grading and installation of drainage, planting of trees and sodding of a bluff area which at the time was being eroded by waves. Street lights and sidewalks were also installed. Later construction of a pier for the Wilmette Harbor and placement of shore protecting bulkheads gradually developed a sandy beach area of 10 acres where only one and a half acres had originally been obtained. In 1916 the park on the bluff was named Ouilmette Park in honor of Wilmette's first citizen, Anton Ouilmette, whose residence was located near the intersection of Lake and Michigan avenues.

The District discovered the acreage created by the canal excavation was almost exclusively an impervious blue clay. It was not until 1917 that the first trees could be planted in soil which had been coaxed into existence through a series of cowpea and mullet plantings which were plowed under to create humus matter. This area became known as Washington Park.

Between 1911-1914, the District purchased a total of 11 lots to create West Side Park, known today as Vattmann Park. In 1914 the District began purchasing land east of Michigan Avenue between Washington and Lake Avenues in hopes of creating a continuous lakefront park. The District acquired the "Church Triangle" at the intersection of 11th Street, Lake and Wilmette avenues in 1916 and leased Bateman Park (Sheridan Road and Michigan Avenue) from the Sanitary District of Chicago the same year.

The canal right-of-way at the east end of Greenleaf Avenue became the site of the first public ice skating rink in Wilmette and the present day Wallace Bowl was used as the Village dumping ground for eight years. In June of 1916 the Wilmette Woman's Club was granted permission to establish public bathing facilities along the lakefront at the foot of Lake Avenue and north about 300 feet. The Wilmette Beach was thus established, and after one year of successful operation by the Woman's Club, the District took over the operation and maintenance of the facilities.

Slow, Steady Growth

Following its founding in January, 1908, the Wilmette Park District, under the leadership of President Louis K. Gillson, began a slow, steady growth designed to acquire and preserve land for the recreational enjoyment of village residents.

In June of 1916, the Wilmette Woman's Club was granted permission to establish public bathing facilities along the lakefront at the foot of Lake Avenue. The Wilmette Beach was thus established and after one year of successful operation by the Woman's Club, the District purchased the beach equipment and opened the municipal beach.

In 1917 the first trees were finally planted in the impervious blue clay that made up the landfill now known as Gillson Park. The years between 1912-1915 had been spent almost exclusively in attempts to get the 22 acres of landfill in a usable condition – teams of horses pulled grading equipment across the clay to establish a topography. Plank floats and block and tackle were employed as needed to rescue teams that became mired up to their backs in sticky blue clay sink holes.

When the Village of Gross Point merged with Wilmette in 1924, its residents did not favor joining the Wilmette Park District, so the District only encompassed the area up to Ridge Road. A referendum in 1946 expanded the District to Hibbard Road and by 1956 it finally included the entire village.

Because the early District did not cover the entire village, a referendum was held in 1926 to create a Playground and Recreation Board, under the jurisdiction of the village, which levied an annual recreation tax and provided limited recreational programming to residents for 47 years – until 1973 when the Recreation Board merged with the District.

In its early years, the Wilmette Park District oversaw only the physical facilities of the parks: land, buildings, structures and maintenance equipment. The District dedicated itself to careful growth which was achieved through land purchases, gifts, leases and trades.

Forest Park, located at 18th Street and Forest Avenue, was purchased in 1926. The WPA began construction in 1936 of an outdoor amphitheater at the Lakefront – that outdoor stage was officially dedicated as the Wilmette Outdoor Amphitheatre in 1946 and later named Wallace Bowl in honor of Gordon Wallace, superintendent of parks from 1936-68. Earlywine Park, at 14th Street and Wilmette Avenue, was added to the District in 1947. In 1949 the first pieces of property were acquired which have grown over the years to become Thornwood Park, Dartmouth and Thornwood Avenues; and Maple Park, 4th Street and Maple Avenue.

The 1950s and 60s saw a rapid expansion of the District. In 1951 the first land was acquired for Hibbard Park, Glenview Road and Skokie Boulevard. In 1954 acquisition of land for Community Playfield at Locust Road began. Langdon Park, first known as Sand-Lo and located at Chestnut Avenue and Sheridan Road, was acquired between 1956-57. West Park, south of Lake Avenue and west of Laramie Avenue was acquired in 1961; Shorewood Park, Elmwood Avenue and Green Bay Road was added to the District in 1964; and Avoca Park, Iroquois Avenue west of Romona Road, was leased from Avoca School District 37 the same year. It remains a leased property. The land that became Centennial Park was acquired between 1967-72.

In 1968 voters narrowly defeated a referendum that would have located a swimming pool, children's park, bath house/warming house, natural ice rink and toboggan hill in Community Playfield. Subsequent acquisition of the land that is now Centennial Park led to the construction of a sports complex facility which includes pools, eight indoor tennis courts and two indoor ice rinks.

Facilities and Programs Expand

The early 1970s were a time of tremendous growth for the Wilmette Park District. Property purchases and strategic alliances formed between the District, the Village and Wilmette Public School District 39 laid the foundation for what has evolved into today's District.

In 1971, the District proposed a sports complex on the site of the Loutsch Farm on Old Glenview Road. Now known as Centennial Park, the complex consisted of six indoor tennis courts and outdoor swimming facilities. The tennis courts were paired in three modules, each 12,000 square feet, which were connected and constructed at different levels. A smaller module housed supporting facilities for both the tennis and swimming areas.

The District put the proposal to referendum as part of a \$1.78 million parks renovation plan that also included construction of the Gillson Beach House and a small Community Center which is now used by the Wilmette Junior High School as its Resource Center. Vigorous campaigning community-wide resulted in the approval of the referendum in February, 1971. The Centennial Tennis Courts opened for business in October 1972.

Less than a year after the 1971 referendum was approved, Northwestern University decided to sell its 106-acre golf course on Lake Avenue and approached Wilmette with a proposal. Legal wrangling about the value of the property and community fears of a massive subdivision development on the site mobilized community groups and residents to lobby for the

preservation of the open land. The Citizens to Save Open Space committee (SOS) backed a Wilmette Park District tax bond referendum to purchase the golf course.

In June 1972 a \$4.4 million referendum was approved overwhelmingly – 5,704 to 785 – and in November of the same year a Cook County Circuit Court judge set a sale price of \$4.2 million on the property. Rehabilitation of the golf course was set as a priority by the District and a practice driving range, four new greens, 10 new tees, an automated irrigation system and four small irrigation lakes were created as part of a major renovation plan.

Just four months after winning approval of the golf course referendum, both the District and Village Board were presented with petitions from citizens demanding a referendum requesting the District purchase and preserve an 11-acre tract of land on the Mallinckrodt College property at Ridge Road and Elmwood Avenue.

The property was already under a purchase agreement between the Society of the Sisters of Christian Charity and a developer who planned to construct 43 single-family homes on the site. A joint referendum was held by the District and Village on January 16, 1973. The proposal failed and consequently a portion of the land was developed.

An expansion of recreational programming was set in motion with a 1973 merger of the Village's Recreation Board with the District. Village Green (now Howard Park) was leased from the Village—an arrangement which still holds today. The District also leased the adjacent Curtis Curling Center which has since been converted to The Atrium, a senior housing complex. The same year the Wheeler family made a gift to the District of the land that has become Wheeler Park, located at Oakwood Avenue and Catalpa Place.

In 1974, a small site on Lockerbie Lane and the Frontage Road near the Edens Expressway was acquired by the District and designated Lockerbie Park.

The same year (1974), the District purchased a 4.8 acre site near Skokie Boulevard and Hibbard Road with the aid of a federal grant. Originally slated to become a playground, staff studies and input from area conservationists underscored the need to preserve the open space in an environmentally friendly manner. A nature learning center was developed over the course of several years, featuring about one-half mile of six-foot-wide paths and nature trails, a shallow pond, footbridge and a man-made waterfall. A wide variety of trees, shrubs, wildflowers and native Illinois grasses were carefully chosen and planted. Bicycle racks, bird feeders, viewing areas and photo blinds, along with a small parking lot, completed the project, and in 1981 the District dedicated the Stephen R. Keay Nature Learning Center. The Keay Center was named for the late director of the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association. The center was built to accommodate the special needs of the disabled.

Following intense lobbying efforts by figure skating and ice hockey enthusiasts, the District built Centennial Ice Rinks—one full sheet of ice and one studio ice rink—at the Centennial

Recreation Complex in 1975. Two additional indoor tennis courts were also added to the tennis facility at that time.

In the late 1970s, while the Wilmette Park District was steadily growing, the schools were experiencing major drops in enrollments. Three schools were closed and sold, including Bell School located at Skokie Boulevard and Glenview Road. The Wilmette Public School District 39 Board of Education also closed Highcrest School but retained ownership for possible use as a school in the future should the school-age population ever increase.

In 1978, District 39 leased Highcrest to the Wilmette Park District in return for facility maintenance and the acceptance of a lease renewed on an annual basis. The ensuing ability to gather all recreation programming under one roof at Highcrest revolutionized the way programming was delivered in Wilmette and was soon being imitated by several suburban neighbors. Classes grew from 240 offerings in 1978 to 1,475 in 1994 when more than 21,000 registrations were taken for Wilmette Park District recreation programs.

The 1980s saw slower, but steady, growth for the District. The Green Bay Bike Trail which traverses Wilmette as part of a multi-community project was completed in 1981.

In 1982, the Park Board determined that age and the elements had taken their toll on the Wallace Bowl, which was originally dedicated as the Wilmette Outdoor Amphitheatre in 1946. The Ouilmette Foundation, a non-profit organization, was founded to raise money for a complete rehabilitation of the Wallace Bowl and restore the historical site as close to its original state as possible.

A rejuvenated Wallace Bowl was rededicated in July, 1984, and included new stone terraces topped with Douglas fir benches, a new drainage system, new lighting, an enlarged stage and new landscaping and paved pathways allowing access for those with disabilities. Wallace Bowl is now the home of the District's summertime Starlight Theatre which provides a unique outdoor setting for musical and dramatic performances offered to the public free of charge.

The Lakeview Center, located in Gillson Park, was dedicated in 1989 and offers shelter to park patrons as well as a beautiful site for meetings and parties nine months of the year.

The action picked up in the 1990s, as attention turned to tot lot renovations and improvements in Lakefront operations, which included the construction of a new Gillson Park Tot Lot, and a sand volleyball court in 1991. Overlook Drive was reconstructed to include a larger walkway, benches and dune grasses to help reduce the amount of drifting sand. A picnic shelter was added in 1992 and a network of interior sidewalks were built to reduce the amount of on-street pedestrian traffic in 1992. The seawall was reinforced by adding rip-rap in 1998, and the Gillson Park tennis courts, which had originally built in 1929, were completely demolished and reconstructed in 1999.

In 1994, the Wilmette Public Schools District 39 Board voted to reopen Highcrest as a middle school, and the District was forced to seek a new home. The Board of Park Commissioners decided it was time to draw a blueprint for the future of recreational programming in Wilmette. Extensive public hearings, news media coverage, professional and staff studies, and debate pointed overwhelmingly to a preference by the community for a single-site location as the home of a Community Recreation Center.

The former Bell School, which had been developed as an office site, was purchased by the District in February, 1995. After extensive renovation and some new construction, the Community Recreation Center was dedicated in October, 1995. The 95,000 square foot Community Recreation Center immediately became the programming hub for the District with classes in art, dance, the performing arts, gymnastics and sports. The Early Childhood Center, the Center Fitness Club, a state-of-the-art gymnastics facility and the Meskill Senior Center all opened at the same time. A sports gymnasium was completed in 1996 and an auditorium, which was funded in part by a \$720,000 state grant, was completed in 1998. The Auditorium now serves as home base for the District's theater programs.

A New Millennium

As the century drew to a close, age began to catch up with the outdoor pools at the Centennial Recreation Complex. The District's Community Relations Committee, a citizen review group, researched the scope of a replacement facility and the feasibility of a referendum to fund such a project. Months of extensive study and public hearings determined residents wanted to retain an outdoor pool facility with added amenities such as water slides and a zero depth leisure pool. On November 7, 2000, voters approved up to \$10 million in general obligation bonds to reconstruct the outdoor pools at Centennial Park. On August 12, 2001, at the end of their 30th season, Centennial Pools were closed and demolished. The new Centennial Family Aquatic Center was dedicated and opened for business less than 10 months later on June 8, 2002.

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the District joined the efforts to raise disaster relief funds by creating a "Reach Out Wilmette" campaign. A series of community-wide special event, which included a patriotic variety show, a 5K Run, aerobics specialty classes, and a Blood Drive raised over \$10,000 in funds for aid to victims of the attacks.

As 2001 was drawing to a close, a group of residents demanded the District purchase the 17-acre Mallinckrodt College site which included the former college building and 14 acres of open land. The site in question was owned at the time by Loyola University and was already under contract with a developer who planned to build single family homes there. Open land advocates, historic building preservationists and proponents of senior/affordable housing banded together and petitioned the District to go to referendum over purchase of the property.

Only 16 months after the \$10 million referendum that funded the reconstruction of the outdoor pools, more than 55% of the voters in Wilmette approved a March 19, 2002,

referendum giving the District the authority to issue up to \$25 million in bonds to purchase, improve and maintain the Mallinckrodt site.

The District purchased the Mallinckrodt property for \$20 million from Loyola University of Chicago in September, 2002. In May, 2003, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources approved a \$2 million grant to the Wilmette Park District under the Open Land Trust program for the preservation of 5.22 acres of open space on the site. The grant helped offset the acquisition costs of the property and in return guarantees the acreage will be held in perpetuity for public conservation, open space, and natural resource-related recreation purposes.

Throughout 2003 the District and the Village of Wilmette worked together to find a viable plan for the adaptive reuse of the former Mallinckrodt College building. It was not until July, 2004, that a sales agreement was reached which would transfer ownership of the building from the District to the Village of Wilmette for sale to a developer who planned to convert the building into condominiums for seniors.

In an ironic twist, while the District was working to settle the future of its newly purchased Mallinckrodt property, an early morning fire destroyed the Terrace Restaurant and damaged the clubhouse at the Wilmette Golf Course on July 13, 2003. Thirty years earlier the District's purchase of the Golf Course from Northwestern University had been a stumbling block in the passage of a referendum which would have approved the acquisition of 11 acres of open land also on the Mallinckrodt site. That portion of the property was developed into single family homes.

The fire damage to the Wilmette Golf Course club house rendered the building unusable. The facility was relocated to trailers in the parking lot in order to minimize loss of playing time for golfers while reconstruction plans could be developed. Following demolition of the old structure, construction of a new club house began in the fall of 2004. The new Wilmette Golf Club was dedicated on August 14, 2005.

In August of 2004, in the midst of rebuilding the Wilmette Golf Club, the District took up a more than 20-year-old cause advocated by the community's young residents—the construction of a skate park. Requests for a skate park came not only from skateboarders, but also from the village's Youth Commission advocates and police authorities who recognized the need to provide a safe alternative to skateboarding in the public right of ways—both for skaters and pedestrians. Beginning in the summer of 2005, the Board of Park Commissioners held public hearings to gather input from residents on a proposed site.

In August, 2005, following an outpouring of community response on both sides of the issue, the Board choose Hibbard Park, adjacent to the District's Community Recreation Center as the site. It was not until July 10, 2007, that the Village's Board of Trustees approved the necessary zoning variations that would allow construction of the skate park to become a reality. The skate park was completed and dedicated in September 2008.

In the meantime, the District moved ahead with the rejuvenation of the nearly 14 acres of open parkland on the Mallinckrodt site. New walkways, quiet contemplative spaces, park benches, a natural outdoor ice area were defined along with a small arbor-like structure at the western boundary of the public parkland and openings in the south wall at both Harvard Street and Cambridge Lane for pedestrian access to the park. New landscaping included 71 trees, 437 shrubs, and native plants including 8,671 perennials and 531 ornamental grasses.

Under the terms of the Mallinckrodt sale agreement, the District retained about 7,000 square foot of space on the ground floor in the south wing of the structure. The interior was renovated as community recreation space and named The Mallinckrodt Center. In addition to being available for community activities the Mallinckrodt facility serves as the home of the Meskill Center – the hub of the District’s programming for Adults 50 and over.

On October 21, 2007, Mallinckrodt Park and the Centennial Gazebo, named in honor of the District’s 100th Anniversary, were dedicated to the community.

Starting from 22 acres of sticky blue clay landfill, the Wilmette Park District has become the guardian of over 300 acres of parks and open land including Gillson Park and Beaches; Keay Nature Center; Community Playfields, Mallinckrodt Park and a portion of the Green Bay Bike Trail. Five facilities including the Lakeview Center; Centennial Recreation Complex; the Community Recreation Center; the Wilmette Golf Club and the Mallinckrodt Center house District programs and activities. Neighborhood parks can be found in 15 additional locations throughout the village. A wide range of recreation programming encompasses children and adults from four months old to seniors.

As the Wilmette Park District entered its second century of service to the community, it committed itself to returning to its roots at the Lakefront with talks of bringing Gillson Park’s infrastructure up to date and renovating/replacing facilities that had fallen into disrepair after decades of exposure to harsh Lake Michigan weather conditions.

It would take 10 years of study, planning, public input, a defeated referendum, community surveys, and the adjustment of expectations in the face of budget realities, before a lakefront plan was approved and ready for implementation. Shortly after Labor Day 2018 the 46- year-old Gillson Park beach house was demolished and the beachfront parking lot was excavated. A new beach house and parking lot are scheduled for completion for the 2019 summer season.

As the creation of a lakefront plan gradually evolved, the daily business of parks and recreation maintained a steady pace. Requests by community members for expanded programming opportunities, along with needs identified by the district’s professional staff, resulted in the introduction of stand up paddle boards and expanded kayak use at the lakefront in 2012.

The year 2013 was scheduled for multiple projects, including major renovations to Centennial Ice Rinks’ refrigeration system, lobby, and locker rooms, a renovation of the Wilmette Golf Club course for storm water and playing improvements, along with the construction of a new paddle

tennis facility at West Park. While all of these projects were ongoing, a heavy spring rainstorm caused a wall at Centennial Tennis Club to buckle and the roof began to collapse. Emergency repairs required excavation work around the tennis facility foundation—placing the opening of the summer outdoor pool season in jeopardy because the pools' filtration lines were located near the damaged wall.

Fast action and flexibility on the part of District staff allowed the pools to open on time for the summer season. Tennis lessons and summer camp programs moved outdoors so stabilization work could be done for the entire tennis facility. As fall 2013 got underway, the ice rink project was completed and tennis moved back into refreshed quarters. By the end of the year a new four-court paddle tennis facility was operational—two more paddle courts were added in 2017. Rounding out the hectic pace of the year was the start of a complete golf course reconstruction project at the Wilmette Golf Club and the hosting of the first annual North Shore Triathlon along the Wilmette lakefront and neighboring communities.

Throughout this decade recreational programming continued to grow—particularly in the area of summer camps where activities expanded from basic sports, art, and performing arts to more than 50 options for tots to teens serving interests that included paddle tennis, waterfront sports, engineering, technology, lifeguarding, and junior camp counselor skills. The park district's state of the art gymnastics gymnasium continued to draw over 10,000 participants to its programs on an annual basis. Because it offers classes for children as soon as they can walk, it is often the first encounter many new parents and residents have with District activities.

The District engaged whole neighborhoods as local tot lots came due for updates. Neighbors were tapped for their input on play equipment and park design preferences, including planting materials. Parks rebuilt/renovated during this time included Earlywine Park, Community Playfield, Shorewood Park, Wheeler Park, and Gillson Park's tot lot. Improvements at Langdon Park are expected to be complete in 2019.

In 2014 the District revived the Ouilmette Foundation for the Parks, an independent board whose mission is to complement and support park-related projects in collaboration with residents, community groups, and partner organizations in order to educate, enhance and enrich the community. The Ouilmette Foundation had originally been incorporated in 1983 to raise funds for a complete rehabilitation and restoration of the historic Wallace Bowl in Gillson Park. Once that goal had been reached the Foundation went dormant.

Fundraising efforts by the rejuvenated Ouilmette Foundation have benefited the District's Family Scholarship Fund, and raised \$60,000 to match a grant from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in order to create a bird habitat in Gillson Park. The bird habitat project, in cooperation with Go Green Wilmette, brought an estimated 346 people from families and 20 community groups to the park in September 2016 where they spent a collective 1,038 hours over two days placing nearly 20,000 plants in the ground for the direct benefit of birds, butterflies and people. Most recently the Foundation has raised funds for the restoration of the Keay Nature Center.

Changes in Leadership

Governance of the Wilmette Park District experienced change as well. Over the course of six years (2009-2015) the District saw five commissioners with a combined 86 years of service to the community retire: James P. Crowley (24 years); Diana G. Cohen (20 years); David G. Miller (20 years); Henry P. Wolff (12 years); and James Brault (10 years). Just a few years earlier Commissioners Phyllis Cossarek had retired after 20 years of service and Richard Marcus after 10 years. All told, between 2003 and 2015 the District saw seven commissioners with a total of 116 years' experience between them take leave of public service.

The professional staff, charged with leading day-to-day District operations, also underwent a wave of changes. Director of Parks and Recreation Terrence Porter retired in 2008 after 22 years in the job. He had worked for the Wilmette Park District for 34 years, during which time the District had built, rebuilt, and renovated/expanded every recreational facility and playground throughout the Village of Wilmette.

Taking Porter's place was Thomas Grisamore, who had been serving as the District's superintendent of facilities and recreation. He was also a park district veteran—having joined the District in 1972 when the Village of Wilmette's Recreation Department merged with the District. Grisamore held the position of executive director for three years before retiring.

Steve Wilson, the current executive director of the park district, stepped into his role on Jan. 1, 2011. Wilson joined the District in 2007 as superintendent of finance and personnel. In the fall of 2017, Bill Lambrecht, superintendent of parks and planning, left the District after more than 46 years of service, and in November, 2018, Kathy Bingham, the District's superintendent of recreation, retired after 39 years.

Keeping up With the Times

The growth of social media and the introduction of online registration changed the way the District conducted business and interacted with residents. In March 2009, the District began accepting class registration online and by fall 2009, the District's website had been updated to provide a broader range of e-commerce experiences for users, along with up-to-date marketing information and a more transparent way of communicating business conducted by the Board of Park Commissioners.

Strengthening Ties Through Cooperative Agreements

In 2013, the Park District and Village of Wilmette began discussions on a partial solution to flooding problems on the west side of town. Following extensive study of neighborhood flooding and storm/sewer water problems, the construction of a 5.5 million gallon tank was proposed to hold storm and sewer water. The challenge was that the proposed reservoir would be located under West Park—site of the new paddle tennis facility and home to playing fields used for soccer, baseball and football. Cooperative efforts by village and District staffs, and their respective governing boards, resulted in an agreement that the village could build an underground tank and compensate the park district by funding the installation of an artificial turf field over the tank. The construction was completed in 2015—the District retained its

playing fields and the village has access to the tank for any necessary maintenance. By 2018 the village was proposing similar projects to hold storm water at three additional park sites.

The Wilmette and Glenview Park Districts entered into a mutual agreement when the Wilmette Golf Club course underwent major renovations beginning in the summer of 2013. Wilmette golfers were extended resident playing privileges in Glenview for the season. Wilmette returned the favor a year later when Glenview launched a similar project.

Expand or Maintain?

Between 2012-2016 the District explored the possibility of acquiring leases from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District (MWRD) for both the Wilmette Harbor (set to expire in July 2013) and property operated by Sheridan Shore Yacht Club (set to expire in 2016) . The District stepped away from talks about the harbor when it became evident that the long term expense, in both dollars and community good will, were more than it wanted to take on. Given that the harbor and yacht club land would continue to remain MWRD properties, the District decided to focus its attention on continuing efforts to develop a long-term plan for the lakefront property that it did own and operate.

During this same timeframe the District declined to engage in two other community driven proposals. In 2013 the village asked the District to consider taking on responsibility for a “rediscovered” parcel of public right of way at the end of Elmwood Avenue. The 80-foot-wide parcel of public land runs down a bluff to the water’s edge. Resident volunteers cleared the land and worked to restore the pathway to the lakefront. The village requested (the) District provide lifeguards for the location, but the District declined, since it already staffed beaches at Gillson and Langdon Parks. It did agree to provide basic summer maintenance and weekend supervision. The right of way remains village property and responsibility.

In February 2015 the Woman’s Club of Wilmette was destroyed in a fire. In the aftermath of the fire, the club’s leadership approached the District as a potential partner/buyer/developer of the damaged building. While the facility’s location near the village center was appealing, the potential cost of reconstruction and lack of parking was more than the District was willing to take on. Having determined the site did not fill a need for the District, the Woman’s Club decided to pursue its own renovation efforts.

On April 7, 2015 voters rejected a lakefront referendum that posed two questions: The first sought \$12.7 million for infrastructure and facility improvements to the 59.2 acre Gillson Park, and the second sought \$1.8 million for construction and park improvements at the 3.4 acre Langdon Park. It was the first time the District had brought a referendum question to voters in 13 years, and the first time voters had turned down a District request in decades.

Park District leadership regrouped after the referendum loss, and by January 2016 it presented residents with a new survey seeking to redefine community desires for lakefront improvements. The survey drew 1,700 responses and favored a smaller scale project focused solely on the infrastructure needs of Gillson Park along with a new beach house and parking lot.

That community input guided the design plans approved by the Board in 2018 and currently under construction.

Looking ahead, the District plans to update and renovate the handicapped accessible Keay Nature Center. The District also remains in conversation with the village over proposals for construction of additional underground storm water tanks in three parks on the west side of Wilmette—Community Playfield, Hibbard Park and Thornwood Park.