

The Wilder Park Conservatory & Greenhouse Project: Planting the Seeds for a More Efficient Future

By Megan McNamara, Marketing Specialist with Elmhurst Park District

The Elmhurst Park District prioritizes and promotes sustainable activities that lead to better outcomes for future generations, and a specific area lately explored that fit these criteria is the renovation of the Wilder Park Conservatory & Greenhouse.

The district is updating its Wilder Park Conservatory & Greenhouse, an over 83-year-old set of structures that is currently undergoing a major renovation to incorporate more efficient heating and cooling systems. Built in 1923, the Wilder Park Conservatory was the very first Elmhurst Park District capital project and serves as a symbol of the community's enduring commitment to horticultural programs. The conservatory logs approximately 13,000 annual visits and serves as a memorable place for prom, wedding, holiday, and graduation photos.

Beloved by Elmhurst residents, the conservatory's horticulture operation provides community beautification and educational programs for adults and youth and is a regional resource for the study of plants and ecosystems, making it a popular destination for school groups. Since 1993, native plants have been raised in the greenhouses for transplanting to natural areas. The number of prairie grasses, forbs and woodland flowers raised in the greenhouses has grown from 500 to nearly 12,000 each year.

The renovation, made possible by a \$1.84 million state PARC grant, provides for improved green technologies and efficiencies with the installation of new HVAC components, glazing system and the use of modern materials, reducing energy loss and improving growing space. An upgraded electrical system will more effectively distribute electricity to the complex, while the removal of arborvitae along the south side of the greenhouse will allow more light to penetrate the greenhouse and conservatory, improving growing conditions.

A primary goal of the Conservatory restoration is to preserve the existing structure and external appearance while maintaining the user experience. The existing south greenhouse, originally built in the 1860s, predates the Conservatory, while the north greenhouse was constructed in 1926, a few years after the Conservatory was built. Both greenhouses have been repeatedly modified over the years, and neither structure has maintained many original components that would lead to inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Therefore, the project calls for the two deteriorating structures to be replaced with a single aluminum structure larger than the existing Conservatory. The restored Conservatory will occupy its original 1,500 sq. ft. footprint, and the new greenhouse will be 3,000 sq. ft. The Conservatory and greenhouse will be separated by an ADA-accessible vestibule

that will connect to the Wilder Park Formal Gardens and will clearly delineate the old and new structures. The final component of the project is the structure referred to as the propagating house (or more commonly, the polyhouse). The current propagating house is comprised of an inexpensive, temporary structure commonly known as a hoop house. A new propagating house will be built apart from the greenhouse and conservatory.

The conservatory restoration also features details meant to pay tribute to its original design. Concrete contractors hand-tooled the cement to recreate the original floor's pattern. Stamping the pattern into the cement was an option, but hand-tooling was selected in order to stay true to the restoration process and the result is a fitting tribute to the original 1923 look.

The restoration of the Conservatory and the building of the new state-of-the-art greenhouse will allow the District and the community to have the best of both worlds, the old and the new, while providing more efficient materials and improved growing conditions for our native plants.