

WARREN

PARKS AND COLLABORATION



PHOTOS BY DAVID ANGELL — FOR THE MACOMB DAILY

Tay Wargo enjoys drawing in the sun at Licht Park Sunday afternoon.

Master plan reflects changing expectations as professionals help guide document

By Susan Smiley

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When Jo Alter found out she would be one of the Design Team Plus architects working on the Warren Parks and Recreation Master Plan, she got excited. Alter is a Warren resident who frequents the city's parks with her young child and knew her hands-on experience would be an asset.

"I already had an intimate knowledge of the city because I have lived here since 2010," said Alter. "It was really cool to give my own input because I have jumped to a lot of different parks around the city just personally for my own leisure. Then I had to research the parks and see them not only from the perspective of my needs, but the needs of everyone around me."



Mike Koehn and Richard Hanson take a break at Licht Park Sunday afternoon.

The Warren City Council gave final approval for the parks and recreation master plan earlier this month. Having such a plan in place gives the city opportunity to apply for various grants and to prioritize park improvements.

Alter has one child, but she had to consider how Warren's parks were working for someone with multiple children or disabled children or for people with no children or for seniors. She also discovered both through observation, on-

line surveys and virtual Zoom town hall meetings with residents that people can use one single park amenity differently. This is what Alter refers to as a "flexible use space."

"A pavilion is something that is lacking in a lot of parks, but it is in high demand," said Alter. "People want a pavilion not only to rent out space and have a party, but maybe to go there and read a book, or use it for home schooling. And having a path to get from the parking lot to the pavilion is also very important."

Architect Harold Remlinger, who worked with Alter on the plan, is a former Warren resident who sat on the city's Village Historic District Commission for four years as its architect of record. He grew up in the city, graduated from War-

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Cousino High School and still carries a lot of affection for his hometown.

“Growing up in Warren, I know the city is a good city,” said Remlinger. “It is one mile by one mile blocks where residents had their own school and park. We were looking at how to preserve those parks for the residents and the community.”

Remlinger remembers he was not allowed to cross major thoroughfares like VanDyke or the mile roads when he was a kid growing up in Warren. If he wanted to go to a park, he walked or rode his bike and stayed within his immediate neighborhood. Some 40 years later, he believes that dynamic has not changed and that small, neighborhood parks are still vitally important.

“I had to stay within the gridded area of my neighborhood on my bike and I went to the parks that were adjacent to me,” said Remlinger, who called Rinke Park his go-to recreational space as a child. “That gave me some insight as to how the city functioned for its residents.”

Remlinger points to the ice skating rink located next to Warren City Hall as an example of a great amenity, but one that most kids are not able to access unless a parent drives them there. He remembers a time when many Warren parks had skating rinks that were created in the winter by flooding a depression in the grass — much like folks create skate ponds in their backyards. Part of the function of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan is to ensure that there is a good mix of amenities throughout the city.

Something that was dif-

ferent with this year’s Design Team Plus update of the master plan that the company fashioned five years ago was the influence of COVID-19. Visiting a park was one of the few things people could do, especially during the first months of the pandemic, so features like walking paths and accessible bathrooms became extremely important to residents.

“The major outcry was everyone wanted to walk, or roller blade, or bike ride,” said Alter. “And this is people of all ages, The older people who attended the meetings said they really wanted a place to walk and a place to sit; the younger people wanted a place to watch their kids.”

Walking paths and trails were something that many Warren parks are lacking or, where they do exist are in need of repair. Path upgrades and installations are a big part of the city’s five-year master plan execution. A walking path is set to be installed at Ridgewood Park and the paths at Licht and other parks are slated for upgrades.

“One of the major discussions we had with the residents was repaving,” said Alter. “Some of the parking areas are so pitted and weathered that some of the slopes are hard to get up with your vehicle let alone trying to push yourself in a wheelchair. Just maneuvering some of these areas is difficult for many residents.”

In general, Alter and Remlinger said living with COVID restrictions made some residents more aware of things that they as architects had noted in their assessment of Warren’s parks.

“People who had maybe not been utilizing the Warren parks in the past because they had the ability to get in their car and drive to Stonv Creek or Metro

Beach or somewhere else now had to rely on going someplace closer to home,” said Remlinger. “We already knew just from our analysis and review of the conditions of some of the parks that people needed these walking paths, but the resident input confirmed that.”

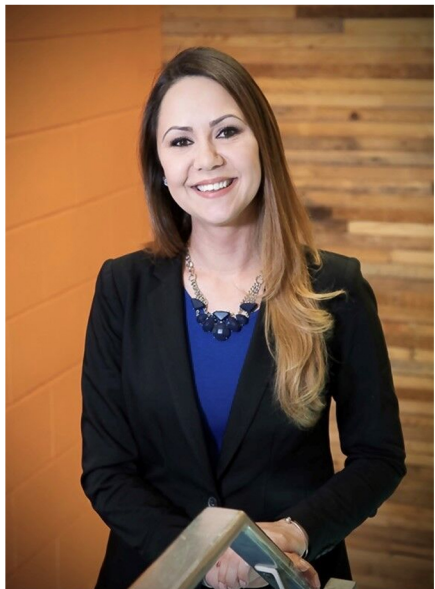
Something else that Alter and Remlinger both noticed was an increased desire for spaces that were more natural. Although this was a trend prior to the onset of the pandemic, both agree it intensified with the onset of COVID-19.

“The most surprising thing I saw in resident input was that they wanted to see the aesthetic of a park geared more toward the natural landscape and less of the highly-manicured, playscape parks that are typical,” said Alter. “People said they wanted more native species and plantings. They didn’t just want a lawn and blacktop with a playscape in the middle; they wanted more.”

Alter believes the thirst for nature is part of the dynamic that has caused a resurgence in popularity of gardening and attention to pollinators. Nature trails and community gardens were brought up time and time again by residents in surveys and virtual time halls.

“They wanted more of a natural park; a place where they could take their dogs out for walks on a trail,” said Remlinger. “And they preferred a trail that meandered rather than a square grid that is kind of boring. They wanted to see butterflies and natural wildlife.”

The Parks and Recreation Master Plan, which includes recommendations from Alter and Remlinger, is available for residents to view at cityofwarren.org/departments/parks-and-recreation



Jo Alter of DesignTeam Plus is a Warren resident who helped develop the city’s new Parks & Recreation Master Plan.



Harold Remlinger, a former Warren resident, used his knowledge of the city to develop the city’s new Parks & Recreation Master Plan.