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Living Land Project in City Park to Honor Denver's Indigenous Heritage

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The seven-acre Living Land project will be developed just south of City Park Nature Play in the Lily Pond area. The first section built will center around native plants, art installations, and places to meditate.

This fall, construction will begin on the seven-acre Living Land project in City Park that is designed to educate visitors about Indigenous land stewardship practices and provide a space for Native communities to gather and celebrate. It will consist of several zones: a large area that features native prairie grasses, a smaller area with a medicinal garden, and a third region with a proposed arbor where people can gather.



Artist and Indigenous consultant Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand thinks art will be important to the project.

Scott Gilmore, deputy director of Denver Parks and Recreation, said this kind of project is long overdue. “We’ve never had a park named after an Indigenous person or a tribal group, so it is fitting for us to move forward with a project like this in a park that was designed on a European model. We’re going to return it to the prairie that it was.”

Kristina Maldonado Bad Hand has been a consultant on the project and says she is thrilled to see the plans come to fruition. “With my elders, there’s always conversations about big projects like this and the narrative is ‘we might not see it in our lifetime’ but my thing is ‘why not?’”

The Sicangu Lakota and Cherokee artist has worked with city officials to hold listening sessions with Indigenous community members about what they would like to see in the park. “People want a place to have a circle, to have conversations. They want to revitalize the area by bringing back the prairie, and they want seed sovereignty with Indigenous plants,” said Maldonado Bad Hand.



Denver resident Sid Whiting, from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, is a consultant on the seven-acre Living Land project.

The \$1.5 million project will be developed just south of City Park Nature Play in the Lily Pond area of the city's largest park. The natural prairie grassland section will be built first. Landscape architect Gretchen Wilson with Dig Studio said her firm created the design after many public meetings with Indigenous leaders. "We will convert the bluegrass turf back to native prairie and we'll integrate it with other plants that would have been there. Plants that would have been harvested for food, for dyes, and for medicines." She added that the prairie section will also feature art installations and places to meditate.

Artist Maldonado Bad Hand hopes that art will be an important part of the new area. "I love the idea of having students paint a mural as part of the arbor." She has also talked with people at the nearby Denver Museum of Nature and Science about creating an artist-in-residency program in the medicine garden. "One that would deal with botany and science and art. I think that would be amazing."

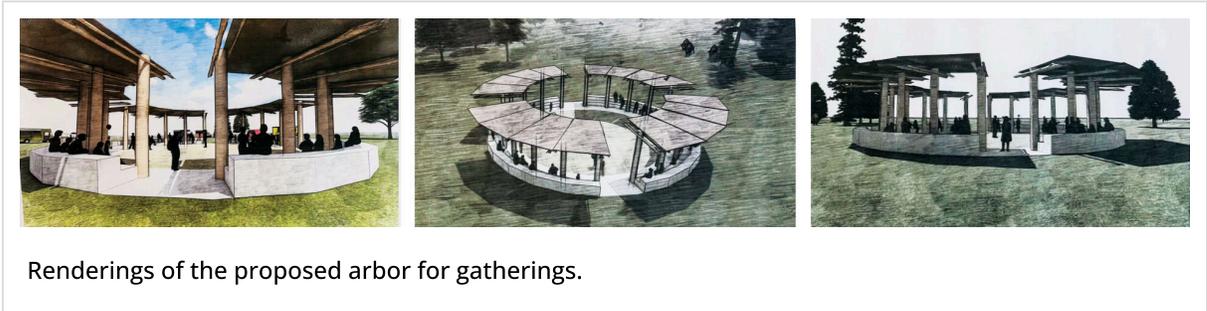
Sid Whiting, a Denver resident from the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, is another Indigenous consultant on the project. He said he's most excited about the proposed arbor. "We'll be able to have gatherings and cultural immersion events, pow-wows and ceremonial things like weddings," said Whiting. "This allows us to express who we are as Native people, to show our stewardship of the land."

But many leaders are quick to emphasize that the new area is not just for Indigenous people. "This project is a way to establish something that will provide an opportunity for educating the community. This is not just for American Indian people. This space is for everybody," said Rick Waters, executive director of the Denver Indian Center. "Hopefully this will spark something. Hopefully this will spark more understanding."



Denver Indian Center Executive Director Rick Waters said the new area isn't just for Native Americans.

The native grassland area is expected to be completed by the summer of 2026. There's no timeline yet when construction will begin on the medicinal garden and gathering spaces.



Front Porch photos by Christie Gosch

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