

The Concept, Case, and Funding
for War Memorial Park
and Little Rock's Existing Park System



Proposed Fair Park Boulevard Entrance Gate



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REASON, MOTIVE, AND CAUSE

On March 16, 2026, Little Rock television station KARK.com posted the following:

“LITTLE ROCK, Ark. – While the Little Rock-North Little Rock metropolitan area ranks high in several categories, it can now add “Most Overweight and Obese City in the U.S.”

The consumer finance site WalletHub, which tracks personal spending, credit, and the cost of health insurance as a percentage of monthly household income, gives the Little Rock metropolitan area an obesity score of 83.96. In 2025, Little Rock ranked second in the same study, with a total score of 83.82, behind McAllen, Texas. The most recent study released in July 2025, stated the Little Rock metropolitan area ranked among the higher tiers nationally for several health indicators including not only obesity, but Arkansas also ranks 15th highest in the nation for adults who are physically inactive. (Fig. 1)

Other health- and wellness-related rankings, which impact individuals’, families’, and the community’s economic well-being, include “health consequences” and “food and fitness.” All of which affect Little Rock’s quality of life. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 1

Overall Rank	Metro Area	Total Score	Obesity & Overweight Rank	Health Consequences Rank	Food & Fitness Rank
1	Little Rock, AR	83.96	3	5	3
2	McAllen, TX	83.22	5	4	4
3	Memphis, TN	83.09	17	1	2
4	Jackson, MS	82.49	1	14	17
5	Augusta, GA	81.78	7	9	8

Fig. 2

REASON, MOTIVE, AND CAUSE

So, what do those rankings have to do with public parks in general and War Memorial Park in particular?

According to the Trust for Public Land, *“Public parks are essential for community health, offering free, accessible spaces that boost physical and mental well-being, while reducing chronic disease risks. Parks provide areas for exercise, stress reduction, improved mental health, and social connection.”*

War Memorial Park, a city-owned, under-developed asset was first created in 1924 as Fair Park and re-dedicated by President Harry S. Truman on June 11, 1949, as War Memorial Park in honor of veterans. The municipal golf course was closed in 2019. What remains today is the acreage and the accessibility necessary to encompass renovated green spaces and new recreation programs and facilities connecting individuals and groups with a shared positive impact on public health.

A renewed War Memorial Park could create a greater opportunity for active lifestyles, education, outdoor recreation, rehabilitation, team and family activities, adaptive and youth sports, entertainment, and environmental programs. And an abundance of natural green space.

This new life for War Memorial Park would address physical inactivity, obesity, poor nutrition, waste reduction, and enhanced knowledge about how to achieve improved personal wellness outcomes and individual family enjoyment.



“Public parks are essential for community health, offering free, accessible spaces that boost physical and mental well-being, while reducing chronic disease risks. Parks provide areas for exercise, stress reduction, improved mental health, and social connection.”

IDENTITY, NATURE, AND VALUE

GOAL

The goal of War Memorial Park redevelopment is to connect individuals, families, and groups in the Little Rock regional community through a shared vision, purposeful mission, and focused action. The action steps and categories therein provide a pathway to achieve the effective and sustainable redevelopment of a near-dormant Little Rock asset built around a health-and-wellness strategy to enhance community growth and improve the quality of life.

The National Park and Recreation Association states the following: *“The nation’s public parks are leaders in improving the overall health and wellness of the nation. They are essential partners in combating some of the most complicated challenges our country faces – poor nutrition, hunger, obesity, and physical inactivity. Park and recreation agencies effectively improve health outcomes and thus should be supported through national and community level funding and policies enabling continued expansion to make a positive change in the health and wellness of our nation.”*

VISION

Create an easily reached, accessible, and barrier-free community and regional destination that supports:

- Natural green space renovation and preservation
- Outdoor leisure and recreational activities
- Physical activity
- Individual and family recreation
- Adaptive sports
- Adult and youth sports programs
- Community activities and events
- Sports-related practice facilities
- Rehabilitation services
- Mental well-being programs
- Healthy social and cultural connections
- Health, wellness, and entertainment venues and events
- Nature-based programs
- Lifelong wellness education
- Environmental sustainability research, education, and water resource management



Proposed Pedestrian Entrance Gate

IDENTITY, NATURE, AND VALUE

MISSION

Develop and sustain War Memorial Park as a centrally located, community-supported, and conveniently accessible public park, which positively impacts the community's quality of life through barrier-free venues for recreation, sports, active lifestyles, education, environment, and entertainment effectively addressing physical inactivity, obesity, rehabilitation, poor nutrition, sustainability, community recreation, and enhanced knowledge about how to achieve improved public health and personal wellness outcomes.



Proposed Health, Wellness, and Fitness Hub

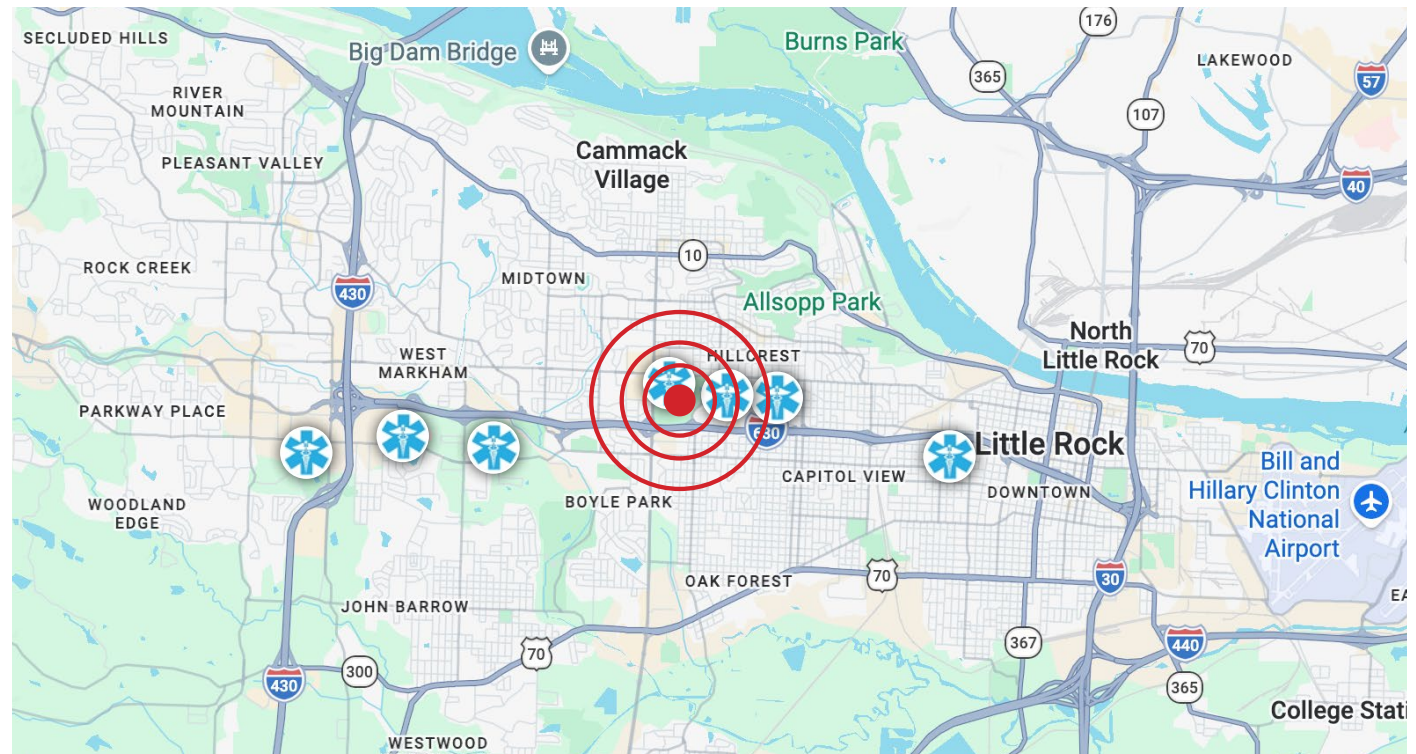
SITUATION AND POSITION

Sited in Arkansas's capital city, War Memorial Park is adjacent to I-630, connecting I-30, I-40, I-430, and I-440, with ease of access from Fair Park Boulevard, University Avenue, and W. Markham Street. Its 120-plus-acre footprint lies at the geographic and population center of the city, generally referred to as "midtown." Little Rock itself is located a mere 19 miles northeast of the geographic center of the state.

Further, the location of the park exists in the middle of what could be considered central Arkansas's medical corridor. This corridor along I-630, from east to west, comprises Arkansas Children's Hospital, the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS), Veteran's Administration Hospital (VA), Arkansas Psychiatric Research Institute, Arkansas State Hospital, Arkansas Department of Health, CHI St. Vincent Hospital, Central Arkansas Radiation Therapy Institute (CARTI), Baptist Health Hospital, and Arkansas Heart Hospital.

War Memorial Park is a treasured public asset with the under-developed resources of an expansive green space, sweeping vistas, water features fed by Coleman Creek, trails and pathways, a single pavilion, and children's playground. Among other assets in adjacency are War Memorial Stadium, the Little Rock Zoo, and the Jim Dailey Fitness and Aquatic Center.

War Memorial Park's 102-year existence – where it is and what it could now become – naturally suggests a new public entity focused on a redevelopment of its existing assets.



War Memorial Park's 120-plus-acre footprint lies at the geographic and population center of the city and the midpoint of Little Rock's I-630 "medical corridor."

COALITION AND COLLABORATION

Parks generally benefit urban residents in the vicinity of the park space, but because of War Memorial Park's size and location, the economic impact would be experienced community wide. These spaces attract and benefit adults, children, seniors, and a broad demographic of a diverse community. Well-funded and effectively managed parks provide safe spaces for activities. They offer urban exposure to nature, exercise, and community gatherings encouraging social connection.

Specifically, War Memorial Park can renew greater economic value for citizens and businesses including higher property values and retail sales; greater attendance for group and team activities, thus increasing visibility and revenues; improved green-space models for other areas of the city; safe spaces for youth and families; and notable personal pride in a citizen-initiated, creative, innovative, and quality-of-life landmark.



War Memorial Park's size allowing for multi-acre green space, multiple activities and facilities complement Little Rock's

approximately 60 existing parks. However, War Memorial Park's location and size as a "central park," provide more equitable access from throughout the city providing a "bridge" for cultural collaboration among a broad population. The neighborhoods in proximity to the park are some of the city's most diverse, all of which could enjoy safe, public spaces for a greater sense community.

Of course, building a coalition is critical to success. In the case of War Memorial Park, the successful coalition to make the redevelopment plan a reality would consist of individuals and groups in proximate neighborhoods, and in sections of the city with a history of greater-than-average civic participation. Influencers and funders must also be part of the coalition. Funding and communications among the coalition's spheres of influence are a core outward-focus of the effort.



Proposed Visitors Kiosk

COALITION AND COLLABORATION

The project would coalesce those benefitting from the redevelopment of the park. Those interests include, but are not limited to:

- Families
- Adults
- Youth and Teens
- Seniors
- Veterans
- People with disabilities
- Civic clubs and organizations
- Recreation and fitness groups
- Conservation and preservation interests
- Schools, churches, synagogues, mosques; spiritual centers and retreats
- Amateur sports teams
- Non-profits and health and recreation charitable organizations
- Physical rehabilitation associations
- Recovery and mental wellness groups
- Neighborhood associations
- Medical corridor-located entities
- Medical group partnerships
- Arkansas State and Little Rock Regional Chambers of Commerce
- Public and private education institutions and organizations
- Retailers and merchants associations
- Commercial, wholesale, and retail enterprises and property owners
- Economic development promoters
- Political, civic, philanthropic, and religious leaders

Each of these targets and more, would be involved in the volunteer-based coalition initiating a citizen-driven reawakening of the park, how to fund its redevelopment, and how to sustain its benefits to the community and its citizens.

To be clear, and as part of the redevelopment vision and mission, the concept and plan would not sanction any land sales or privately owned development. Public-private partnerships for amenity leases and operation, providing additional funding for park maintenance, could be considered.

METHODOLOGY

In the Coalition and Collaboration section, above, the term “citizen-initiated” was referenced in relation to “...notable personal pride in a citizen-initiated, creative, innovative, and quality-of-life landmark.” The citizen-initiated aspect of the enterprise is to create at the outset a sense of ownership of War Memorial Park. The effort, then, becomes not a city “government” effort, but a city “people” effort.

The initiative process for ballot issues is a hallmark of our constitutional democracy, understanding the core of the principles on which the republic was founded: the consent of the governed and the ultimate power remaining with the people.

The “by the people, for the people” direct democracy can, through a petition-drive process, put up for a vote of the people new laws, amendments, or, in the case of War Memorial Park, a municipal ordinance. A citizen-initiated ordinance, through a petition drive, is how the park redevelopment effort could begin. The initial benefit of a petition drive is to build a Little Rock registered-voter-focused effort, translating to a campaign coalition. But why else go the volunteer petition route?



Experience shows a history of success with popular votes for local sales taxes dedicated to a single or limited purposes. Particularly those eventual ballot issues coming from citizen interest in capital improvement projects. The fact is local sales taxes not focused on a single or specific category of related capital improvement projects often fail. While those otherwise clear, concise, and limited ballot measures enjoy public support. Many measures pass in in a special or primary election. Broader or more complex proposals face major hurdles, even more so in general elections.

Three of several cases in point are North Little Rock, Batesville and Searcy:

In August of 2017, North Little Rock proposed a 1¢ sales tax made up in two issues: a temporary, five-year ½¢ tax for public safety improvements and a permanent ½¢ sales tax for operations. The focus of the campaign centered on the public safety benefits of the temporary tax, including a new police



Riverside Park, Batesville

METHODOLOGY

and courts building and a new fire station. In addition, each city ward was allocated \$500,000 for improvements, thus providing city-wide benefits and specific ward-directed improvements.

Voters in Batesville, Arkansas, overwhelmingly approved sales tax-supported bonds to fund over \$20 million for recreation and water projects. Two of the August 2023 sales tax issues to fund the refinancing of recreation bonds and the issuance of new recreation bonds passed with over 75% of the vote. The new funding specifically addressed the “reimagining” of Riverside Park with an events center, sports courts, nature play, expansive green space, inclusive playground, amphitheater, and upgrades to parking and restrooms.



New Community Center, Searcy

Searcy followed suit in March 2024 approving a pair of local sales tax measures totaling \$93 million. The vote was to fund well-defined, recreation-related projects, including a water park, trails, sports complex, and a specific city park improvement. Searcy Mayor Mat Faulkner thinks community engagement made the difference in winning support for the ballot measure. “The public engagement portion,” he said, “was the foundation and the crux of achieving a successful effort.”

Little Rock, on the other hand, has had two, recent “bites at the apple.” Both these increased-sales-tax proposals were referred to voters by the Little Rock Mayor and City Board of Directors. The first in 2021 would have levied a 10-year, 1% sales tax to support parks, a multi-sports complex, the Little Rock Zoo, a new West Little Rock fire station, community police officers, early childcare, the Little Rock Port, new downtown parking decks, the Museum of Discovery, downtown ambassadors for the Downtown Little Rock Partnership, and more. The uses were set out in a non-binding resolution passed by the City Board. The measure failed with 62% voting against.

Likewise, in 2024, two sales tax issues were placed by the city on the same ballot to levy a 1% sales tax increase. The first issue was a 10-year, 5/8¢ tax for building and improvement projects. It failed with 57% voting against. The second, for infrastructure improvements, levied a permanent, 3/8¢ sales tax for general operations, which failed with 60% voting against.

METHODOLOGY

Both the 2021 and 2024 sales-tax issues included tax revenue dedicated to War Memorial Park, based on generalized plans. Anecdotal public comment after the issues failed posited the plans included in the promotion of the taxes contained few specifics on how the money would be used, for what, and the fact the resolutions placing the issues on the ballot were non-binding. General operations of city government, it appears, was not compelling in either case.

A 2011 sales tax referred to Little Rock voters was successful. The 5/8¢ and 3/8¢ sales taxes were primarily focused on a single issue: public safety — police, fire, and emergency communications. Public safety is an emotional motivator for voters. General city operations and infrastructure are much more difficult in today's political climate and are perceived by voters as tax overload. A proposed laundry list of expensive projects requiring additional future funding for operation and maintenance potentially confuse voters and prevent a focus on a single benefit to the wider community. Some view these multi-agency proposals as too bureaucratic. Plus, raising taxes for infrastructure needs appear to voters to be basic functions and services the city should already be funding with the existing tax base.

There is another successful sales-tax case. In 2012, the legislature referred to the General Election ballot a 10-year, ½¢ statewide sales tax dedicated to improving and expanding Arkansas's four-lane highway system. The plan was named "Connecting Arkansas" and was sponsored by a citizen-led collaboration of interests dubbed "Move Arkansas Forward." The political consensus, including the then-governor's opinion, was the issue would fail. However, the campaign strategy targeted specific areas of the state, listed priorities, promoted a state map showing where the money would be spent, developed a widely distributed booklet illustrating how much every Arkansas city and county would receive in turnback funds to pay for local roads, streets, and bridges. The ballot issue also stipulated there would be no increase in the sales tax on food. The issue passed statewide with over 58% of the vote.



Proposed Fair Park Boulevard Entrance Gate

ACHIEVING DESIRED OUTCOMES

War Memorial Park redevelopment deserves a clear and concise concept that will be crafted into a single-issue ordinance with dedicated funding exclusive to War Memorial Park and for a reinvestment in Little Rock's existing park system. A master conceptual plan outlining the possibilities for War Memorial Park should be clearly illustrated through a map or "footprint."

Based on historical experience, some of which is outlined above, an exclusively dedicated, limited city sales tax excluding any increase on food, is the best strategy to pursue. And to ensure the citizen-initiated aspect of the desired outcome of redeveloping a centrally located and accessible public park, a volunteer petition drive would ensure citizen buy-in. The petition-drive effort and subsequent election should include a specific strategic plan for the drive and the campaign, illustrations of how and on what the revenue from the temporary tax would be spent,



governance and stewardship responsibilities, and revenue for ongoing maintenance and improvement.

The petition process would need to garner a minimum of 9,500 qualified, Little Rock registered voters' signatures. (The goal would be 15,000 to meet the 9,500-signature threshold, due to some signatures being unverifiable or disqualified by the Pulaski County Clerk's office.)



Proposed Amphitheater

ACHIEVING DESIRED OUTCOMES • Master Plan



- (A) Updated existing north clubhouse
- (B) Upgraded & restored trail system
- (C) Entrance gateways
- (D) Visitor's kiosk building
- (E) Pedestrian entrance gate
- (F) Expanded ADA playground & splashpad
- (G) New pavilions
- (H) Existing pavilion
- (I) Expanded fishing pond
- (J) Fishing dock
- (K) New spillways & cascades
- (L) Pedestrian bridges
- (M) Health, wellness and fitness hub
- (N) Amphitheater
- (O) New practice course & courts clubhouse
- (P) Tennis & pickleball courts
- (Q) 3-hole golf practice course with practice greens & driving range
- (R) Sustainability Education Center
- (S) Riparian floodplain stormwater wetland with gabion jetties
- (T) Restored Little Rock Zoo Access tunnel
- (U) Native plant garden



WAR MEMORIAL PARK REDEVELOPMENT

PHASE I

A - Green space preservation

- B** - Trail upgrades and restoration
- Fishing pond clean-out and expansion
 - Playground expansion and existing pavilion improvements
 - Coleman Creek streambank stabilization
 - Native plant garden



WAR MEMORIAL PARK REDEVELOPMENT

PHASE II

- A** - Golf practice course construction
 - Tennis and pickleball courts construction
 - New practice course and courts clubhouse construction
- B** - New pavilions construction
- C** - Pedestrian bridges and parking

REASON, MOTIVE, AND CAUSE



WAR MEMORIAL PARK
REDEVELOPMENT

PHASE III

- A** - Existing north clubhouse renovation
- B** - Entrance gateways
- C** - Health, wellness and fitness hub construction
- D** - Little Rock Zoo access tunnel restoration
- E** - Amphitheater construction
- F** - Stormwater wetlands construction
- G** - Sustainability Education Center construction

EXISTING PARKS

The opportunity for revenue dedicated to the redevelopment of War Memorial Park, Little Rock's largest and most centrally located public park, also provides a funding platform to create revenue for a fund to reinvest and renovate Little Rock's other 56 local parks.

Little Rock's existing, city-funded parks system encompasses over 4,500 developed acres. Park categories include 15 large parks (50+ acres); 14 community parks (20-50 acres), 16 neighborhood parks (5-20 acres); and 12 mini parks (less than 5 acres). Revenue for maintenance and operation of the existing system is limited. And funding for further development or enhancement is challenging.

Establishment of a capital fund for reinvestment in existing parks, and a similar fund for maintenance would be based on the turnback concept. With the establishment of a War Memorial Park Improvement Fund, a percentage of the annual and accumulated three-year sales tax would be dedicated to existing parks. Little Rock's Department of Parks and Recreation would receive the monies from the War Memorial Park Improvement Fund and make the decision on how to apply the funds through an Existing Parks Renovation Fund and an Existing Parks Maintenance Fund.



DEDICATED FUNDING

Based on 2025 Little Rock revenue, a three-year, ½¢ sales tax, without raising taxes on food or food ingredients (grocery store sales), would raise an estimated \$34,733,400 each year of the three-year period. From this amount would be dedicated specific funds for a War Memorial Park Endowment Fund and a War Memorial Park Maintenance Reserve Fund, as well as accumulated revenue over three years for an Existing Parks Renovation Fund and an Existing Parks Maintenance Reserve Fund.

In addition, 5% of the annual Little Rock Parks and Recreation budget and 5% of the annual Little Rock Vehicle Storage Fund budget could be dedicated to ongoing park maintenance. Plus, the maintenance reserve fund, grants from the endowment, other grants in support of health, wellness, public parks, and outdoor state and federal programs, and a 501 (c)(3) non-profit corporation designed to raise funds for overall support of the park provide opportunities for sustainability.



A three-year, ½¢ sales tax, excluding increased taxes on food and food ingredients (grocery sales), would raise an estimated \$34,733,400 each year of the three-year period.

BENCHMARKS AND ESTIMATES

Citizen research, consultation, concept, and planning will drive the timeline. As well as inclusive preparation to move forward and submit a plan to Little Rock citizens for review and acceptance. There would be a calendar to meet benchmarks governing the petition drive and when it must be submitted for verification in order to offer voters the choice to approve or reject the ballot issue implementing the War Memorial Park redevelopment plan. Petitions are required to be submitted no more than 90 days, nor less than 60 days prior to the election date. The ordinance would specify a 2028 regular election date (tentatively scheduled for the March 7, 2028, primary election).

These concepts, plans, and funding would be spelled out in a City Ordinance as part of the petition drive and ultimate vote. The ordinance would be part of the actual petition voters would be asked to sign, as well as published plans, illustrations, and Frequently Asked Questions information in printed form, online, and through public promotion.

The “30,000-foot” view of this approach for the dedication of available revenues from the three-year sales tax, excluding food, could yield the following line-item funding based on 2025 actual Little Rock sales tax revenue.

I. WAR MEMORIAL PARK AND EXISTING PARKS REVENUE FUNDS

(Three-year, ½¢ sales tax estimates based on 2025 revenue)

A. Gross ½¢ sales tax annual revenue:.....	\$36,600,000
B. Less annual revenue on food and food ingredients (5.1%):	\$1,866,600
C. Remaining available annual revenue:.....	\$34,733,400
D. Dedication of 7.5% of remaining annual revenue to War Memorial Park Endowment Fund:.....	\$2,605,005
E. Remaining available annual revenue:.....	\$32,128,395
F. Dedication of 5% remaining annual revenue to War Memorial Park Maintenance Reserve Fund:	\$1,606,419
G. Remaining available annual revenue:.....	\$30,521,976
H. Dedication of 12% remaining annual available revenue to Existing Parks Renovation Fund:	\$3,662,637
I. Remaining available annual revenue:.....	\$28,232,828
J. Dedication of 8% remaining annual revenue to Existing Parks Maintenance Reserve Fund:.....	\$2,258,626
K. Remaining annual net available revenue dedicated to War Memorial Park Improvement Fund:.....	\$24,710,592

REASON, MOTIVE, AND CAUSE

I. WAR MEMORIAL PARK AND EXISTING PARKS REVENUE FUNDS *(continued)*

L. Three-year available net revenue dedicated to War Memorial Park Improvement Fund:	\$74,131,776
M. Three-year available net revenue dedicated to War Memorial Park Endowment Fund:	\$7,815,015
N. Three-year available net revenue dedicated to War Memorial Park Maintenance Reserve Fund:.....	\$4,819,257
O. Three-year available net revenue dedicated to Existing Parks Renovation Fund:	\$10,987,911
P. Three-year available net revenue dedicated to Existing Parks Maintenance Reserve Fund:	\$6,775,878

II. WAR MEMORIAL PARK ANNUAL MAINTENANCE FUNDS

A. 5% of annual Parks and Recreation budget (\$11,875,529) dedicated to War Memorial Park Improvement Fund:.....	\$593,776
B. 5% of annual Vehicle Storage Fund budget (\$2,550,205) dedicated to War Memorial Park Improvement Fund:.....	\$127,505
C. War Memorial Park Endowment Fund annual earnings (9.5%) dedicated to War Memorial Park Improvement Fund:.....	\$247,475
D. War Memorial Park Improvement Fund annual maintenance budget:.....	\$968,756*

**Does not include total reserve maintenance fund from three-year sales tax revenue of \$4,819,257 (see N., above)*

The citizens of Little Rock have the collective power to express their rights and their will by placing on the ballot an issue to redevelop War Memorial Park and fund the renovation of the existing parks system.

This is an opportunity that should not be missed.

V. MARKHAM ST.



CHI ST. VINCENT



WAR MEMORIAL PARK REDEVELOPMENT

WAR MEMORIAL
STADIUM

ZOO DR.

LITTLE ROCK ZOO

FAIR PARK BLVD.

N. UNIVERSITY AVE.

CLUB HOUSE DR.

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