

# New Ryan Park to reflect South Norwalk neighborhood's roots while looking to future

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News



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**NORWALK** — It was hot Thursday afternoon in South Norwalk, and Walter Harris sat on an upturned milk crate in the shade of his Raymond Street driveway, just a few hundred feet from Ryan Park.

Other than the audible construction down the block on the next phase of the conversion of [Washington Village](#) housing projects to the mixed-use Soundview Landing, there was little activity around the dug-up park. Harris relished the relative peace — not just of the park, which has been [closed for renovation](#) since 2017, but of the gentrifying neighborhood — in what was once known by some as a hub for [criminal activity](#).

“It was all drugs and stuff, way back,” Harris said. “It’s better now, it’s nice and quiet.”

But other former residents remember the park differently. According to the artist Jahmane, who’s lived much of his life in South Norwalk, the park and the adjacent South Norwalk Community Center provided a meeting place for people from different neighborhoods, going back as far as the 1980s. Carnivals, cookouts, basketball tournaments and children playing were the norm.

“Back then, it was the advent of hip-hop,” Jahmane said. “We would go there (to the community center) and break dance. It was the place where people gathered. Then it would spill out into the park, which gave people to have a space to still enjoy themselves and dance.”

The roughly \$1.1 million effort to rehabilitate the park has been undertaken with both facets of Ryan Park’s history in mind and with the hope of accommodating both old residents of the neighborhood and new ones.

The project is part of the federal [Choice Neighborhood Initiative](#) grant — which also helped fund the redevelopment of Washington Village — meant to improve housing and inter-generational mobility and build community in distressed neighborhoods.

Common Councilman Ernie Dumas, who has been a vocal advocate for residents of Washington Village, hopes it can preserve the memory of the neighborhood while also combating feelings of alienation he's heard from some longtime residents.

"It's a good way of preserving the memory, yes," Dumas said of the project. "But some of the people there, in their minds, Ryan Park belongs to them. And now that we have a mixture of people coming in, they feel that it's being taken away in a sense."

The new park, like the old, will feature a basketball court and open space. A splash pad and playground will also be built for children. But, most importantly, the new park will pay homage to past residents of Washington Village with a series of public art installations that aim to bring positive attention to the area.

"Some people remember it fondly, other people have more negative memories," said Julio Pardo, creative director for the Ryan Park project. "It was run down, it was a bit neglected by the city."

Pardo has acted as the liaison between the city and local artists and helped devise a way to celebrate the area's past while pushing toward a brighter future. Earlier this year, he put out a call for artists to submit designs for the project's two major elements: re-purposed doors from Washington Village homes, which will be displayed at each of the park's four entrances, and the basketball court, on which a mural will be painted.

"Each artist will have their own execution," Pardo said. "Basically, we're just trying to get different points of view."

In recent months, Pardo received submissions from local artists like Jahmane, 5iveFingaz, Lizzy Rockwell, Duvian Montoya and Conan Robinson, among others. Several community meetings were held in recent months to get feedback, including a display at the SoNo Arts Festival, where Pardo took comments on the various designs. He expects that he, the Redevelopment Agency and the Norwalk Housing Authority — which oversees the CNI grant — will commission the artworks within the month. The park is expected to be mostly complete by the end of September, according to Susan Sweitzer, Norwalk Redevelopment Agency senior project manager for development.

The proposals vary significantly in concept and approach.

Sculptor Carlos Davila proposed a design featuring aircraft aluminum and stainless steel, inlaid within the door's panels — a tribute to Ryan Park's past as a manufacturing site. Jahmane proposed two murals for the basketball court, one a tie-dye design with the words "peace, love, unity, fun," and the other a Space Jam-inspired abstract piece. Artists from the MadLab proposed a rainbow-colored walking trail on which positive messages would be painted.

Robinson, who lived for 11 years at Washington Village and was often a DJ in the park, submitted a door design with the words "tears, joy, love, prayers, power, music," beside a speaker and above rising flood waters, which often wreaked havoc on the housing project.

Robinson, like Harris, has seen the neighborhood change and believes it's mostly for the best.

"It's different," Robinson said. "There have been a lot of changes and there's a lot of things I miss about it. You see different faces, but it's good to see diversity."

But the new housing, which some former Washington Village residents have

described as “hotel-like,” brings with it certain social challenges. Instead of doorways that opened onto busy courtyards, or directly onto the park, residents of Soundview Landing or the market-rate units at 19 Day St. exit their apartments into long, often-vacant hallways.

Jahmane wondered whether the public art and rehabilitation of Ryan Park will be enough of a draw.

“I think a big thing that we’re going to have to see is how the layout of Soundview Landing sort of converts to the uses of the park,” Jahmane said. “Washington village, the way it was designed, kept it a little more fluid as a living space. Now that the tenants are going to be living in these high-rise apartments, it sort of cuts out the connectedness of the community. It will change how people access the park, to come down out of their house and go across the street, it’s more of an involved thing.”

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