

The Chandler Park Marshland

— BY ALEX J. ALLEN —

Turning
stormwater
into
opportunity



When most people think about Chandler Park, they picture basketball games, soccer fields, playgrounds filled with children, community festivals, summer concerts, and family gatherings. What many visitors may not realize is one of the park's most innovative features works quietly every day, protecting the environment, improving water quality, and helping Detroit prepare for the future.

Nestled near Dickerson and Frankfort Streets on the east side of the park is the Chandler Park Marshland, a remarkable, green-infrastructure project that has transformed how stormwater is managed, while creating new opportunities for environmental education, wildlife habitat, and community engagement.

The marshland is much more than a wetland. It is a living example of how communities can work with nature to solve urban challenges. It represents years of vision, collaboration, and investment in a healthier and more sustainable future for Detroit.



From Problem Area To Community Asset

Before the marshland existed, this section of Chandler Park was known as a low-lying area that frequently collected water after storms. During wet periods, the site was often difficult to use, and residents viewed it as a problem area. But community leaders, residents, environmental experts, and park advocates saw something different. Rather than fighting nature, they asked a simple question: What if this area could become part of the solution?

That question helped shape a larger vision for Chandler Park. A vision that imagined the park as more than a recreational destination. Leaders envisioned an urban conservation campus where recreation, education, and environmental stewardship can coexist. Stormwater management became a critical component of that vision.

Completed in 2019, the Chandler Park Marshland transformed an underutilized area in the park into one of Detroit's most significant examples of green stormwater infrastructure. Today, the marshland can manage more than 2.5 million gallons of stormwater runoff, helping reduce pressure on Detroit's combined sewer system while creating a vibrant natural landscape for residents and visitors to enjoy. A good portion of the water comes from a 174,500-square-foot parking lot and a 235,400-square-foot soccer field area.

Working With Nature

Detroit, like many older cities, relies on a combined sewer system that carries both wastewater and stormwater. During heavy rain events, large volumes of runoff can overwhelm the system, contributing to flooding and sewer overflows. The team designed the Chandler Park Marshland to address that challenge naturally.

Rather than sending every drop of rainwater into underground pipes, the marshland captures, stores, and filters stormwater on-site. Rainwater that once rushed directly into the sewer system is now directed into the wetland basin, where it slows down and begins a natural treatment process.

As water moves through the marshland, sediments settle out, and pollutants are filtered naturally. Native wetland plants absorb nutrients, improve water quality, and help support a healthy ecosystem. Beneath the surface,



a sophisticated network of pumps, pipes, catch basins, and drainage structures works together to regulate water levels and ensure the system functions effectively.

The infrastructure includes more than 1,000 feet of piping and specialized stormwater-management equipment designed to manage runoff from surrounding areas of the park.

The result is a resilient system that manages millions of gallons of stormwater while reducing strain on Detroit's aging infrastructure.

More Than Flood Control

Although flood mitigation is an important benefit, the marshland was never intended to be only a stormwater project. From the beginning, the Chandler Park Conservancy envisioned the marshland as a place where residents could experience nature in the heart of the city. Detroit teen VaShon Pullom says, "It is cool to see the water like this in a city park." Today, visitors can walk along observation areas and experience a thriving ecosystem that did not exist just a few years ago.

Thousands of native plants were carefully selected to improve ecological health and support local wildlife. These species require less maintenance, less irrigation, and fewer chemical inputs than traditional landscaping while providing significant environmental benefits.

The marshland has become a haven for birds, butterflies, bees, and other pollinators. Migratory birds use the area as a resting and nesting site, while native flowering plants provide critical habitat and food sources for insects and wildlife.





For many visitors, seeing wildlife flourish within Detroit's urban landscape is a powerful reminder that healthy ecosystems and vibrant cities can coexist.

A Living Classroom

The most exciting aspect of the marshland is its educational potential. The Chandler Park Conservancy has long believed that parks should be places where people learn as well as play. The marshland provides a unique opportunity for students, families, and community members to experience environmental science firsthand. "I love the Outdoor Classroom. It provides a great opportunity for students to learn about environmental science," says Yvette Bass, Deputy Director of the Detroit Park Coalition.

Instead of reading about wetlands in a textbook, students can observe how water moves through a landscape, learn how native plants support biodiversity, and see how green infrastructure can address real-world environmental challenges.

The Chandler Park Conservancy has built an Outdoor Environmental Education Plaza adjacent to the marshland, equipped with Wi-Fi and a charging station for cell phones and computers. The plaza serves as an outdoor classroom where visitors can learn about stormwater management, ecology, wildlife habitat, climate resilience, and sustainable design. The City of Detroit General Services Department also added a natural playground to complement the area. The goal is to make Chandler Park a destination for environmental education, not only for Detroit residents, but for schools, organizations, and visitors from throughout the region.



Building On Success

The success of the marshland has inspired additional green-infrastructure investments throughout Chandler Park. Phase two of the marshland project introduces a stormwater channel along the Dickerson side of the park that manages water that flows from the street into the marshland. One of the next major initiatives is the Stormwater Project at the tennis court area. The project will incorporate rain gardens, bioswales, and other natural stormwater-management features designed to capture approximately 225,000 gallons of stormwater runoff.

Together with the marshland, these improvements will further reduce flooding, improve water quality, and create additional habitat throughout the park.

These investments are part of a broader strategy to transform Chandler Park into a model for sustainable, urban-park development, one where recreation, conservation, education, and environmental stewardship work hand in hand.



Looking Ahead

As climate change brings more intense rainfall events and increasing pressure on urban infrastructure, projects like Chandler Park Marshland are becoming even more important.

The marshland demonstrates that parks can do far more than provide recreational opportunities. They can help cities adapt to environmental challenges, improve water quality, create wildlife habitat, educate future generations, and strengthen community connections.

For the Chandler Park Conservancy, the marshland represents more than a successful infrastructure project. It represents a vision of what is possible when communities invest in nature-based solutions.

Every time rain falls on Chandler Park, the marshland quietly goes to work, capturing stormwater, protecting the environment, supporting wildlife, and demonstrating the power of innovation rooted in nature.

It is a reminder that some of the most important work happening in our parks is not always the most visible. Sometimes it happens quietly, beneath the surface, where conservation, education, and community come together to create a healthier future. Chandler Park Conservancy's Community Gardener, Toya Mason, says, "I love water, so for water to be there at the park, in the neighborhood park in an urban area, I love it. It's relaxing, it's refreshing, it's soothing to my soul."

The Chandler Park Marshland stands as a powerful example of how one park can make a lasting difference, not only for today, but for generations to come.

Finally, stormwater projects like this would not be possible without the support of our philanthropic community and local government partners. The Chandler Park Marshland was made possible by the Kresge Foundation, Erb Family Foundation, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, LEAR Corporation, The Carls Foundation, City of Detroit General Services Department, Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, Stellantis, The Greening of Detroit, The Detroit Parks Coalition, and the State of Michigan. **PRB+**

Alex J. Allen, III has served as President and CEO of the Chandler Park Conservancy since 2016, where he leads collaborations with residents, stakeholders, local institutions, businesses, government, and philanthropy to transform Chandler Park into a premier campus for education, recreation, and conservation on Detroit's east side. Under his leadership, the Conservancy has secured more than \$11.5 million in funding and leveraged another \$17 million, resulting in new amenities such as an athletic field and fieldhouse, tennis courts, a skatepark, a walking path, playgrounds, outdoor exercise equipment, and an environmental wetland, along with programming such as a summer sports camp, and annual community events like Senior Appreciation Day and concerts with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.



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