

Oregon Hill Home Improvement Council

619 West Cary Street, Richmond VA 23220

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To: Parks and Recreation Director Frelke and Richmond Inspire planning staff and consultants
From: Board of the Oregon Hill Home Improvement Council (OHHIC)
Re: Richmond Inspire plan of the Richmond Department of Parks and Recreation
Date: March 4, 2026

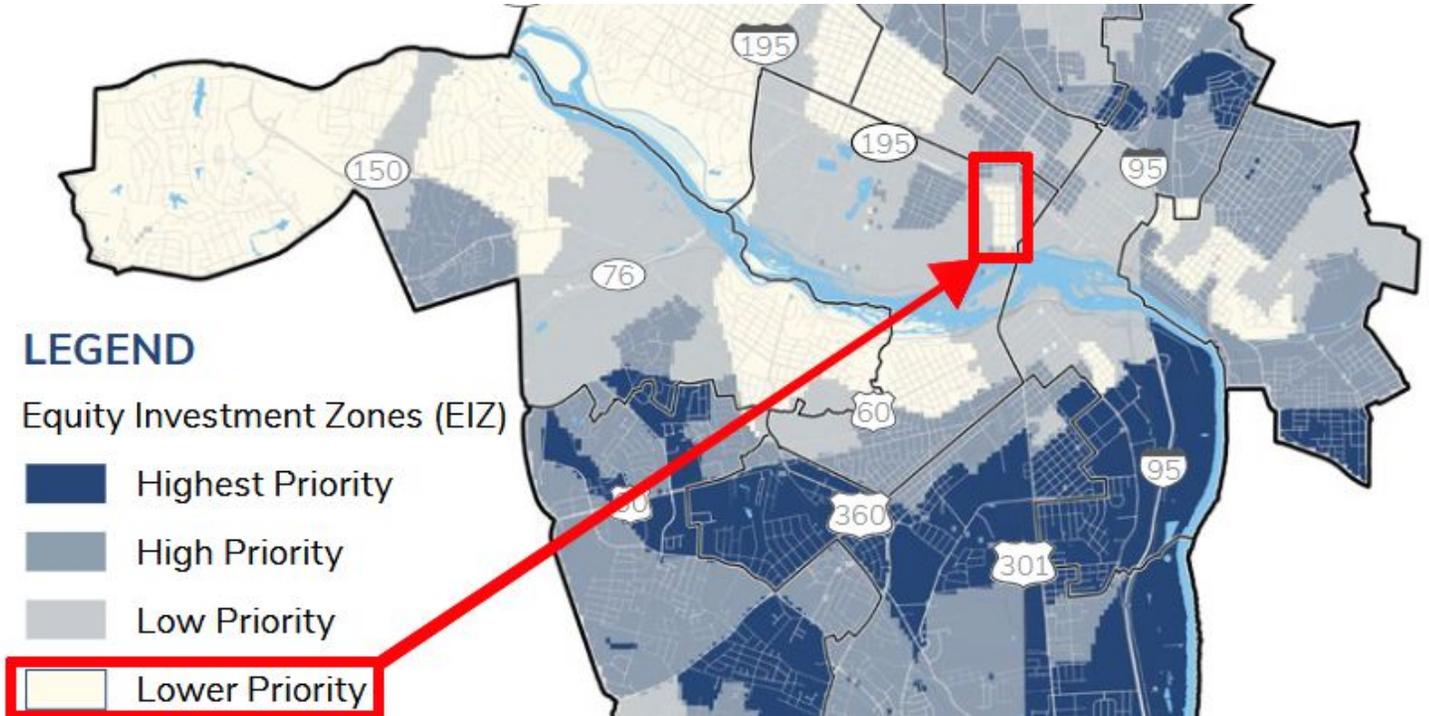
Thank you for the opportunity for the Oregon Hill Home Improvement Council (OHHIC) to comment on the Richmond Inspire plan. For over 30 years the non-profit OHHIC has actively worked to improve the quality of life in the Oregon Hill neighborhood.

We appreciate the work that the Parks Department is doing to improve the city's parks. We are especially grateful for the excellent work of the very devoted Capital Projects Planner Ryan Rinn in directing the improvements for Oregon Hill's Holly Street Playground with funding from the American Rescue Plan.

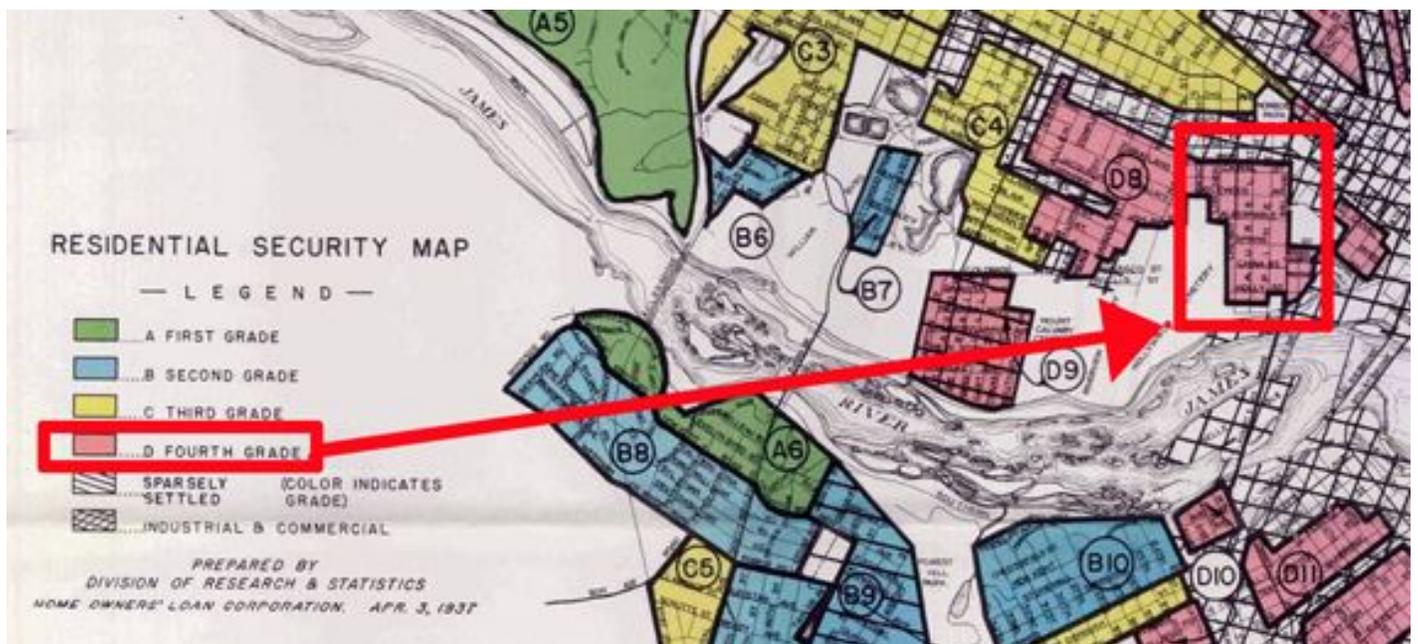
However, the Board of OHHIC strongly objects to the unfair and inequitable placement of most of the Oregon Hill Historic District in the "Lower Priority" [that is, the LOWEST Priority] category of the Richmond Inspire Equity Investment Zone classifications in the Richmond Inspire plan. Oregon Hill was a redlined neighborhood and suffered many decades of neglect and deferred maintenance of its park infrastructure. We urge the Parks Department to place the Oregon Hill neighborhood in the "Highest Priority" Equity Investment Zone category.

As you should be aware, Oregon Hill experienced enormous economic discrimination because it was identified as a redlined neighborhood with the lowest "Fourth Grade" security rating. This economic discrimination resulted in the routing of the Downtown Expressway through the Oregon Hill neighborhood in the 1970s, and resulted in the demolition for "urban renewal" of all of the blocks of the Oregon Hill affordable housing east of Belvidere Street. Furthermore, Virginia Commonwealth University demolished blocks of Oregon Hill, which the University targeted as the lowest-priced real estate for expansion. As recently as the mid-1970s, it was still very difficult to buy homeowner's insurance in Oregon Hill because the industry had openly "red-lined" the neighborhood. In 2002, the city even tried to sell to a developer the Oregon Hill city park at Laurel and Albemarle Streets (now named Robert Pleasants Park), and the sale was only stopped after the neighborhood presented documentation that the land was purchased in 1971 exclusively for park use with federal "Parks in the Cities" funding. Even more recently, in 2020 the city attempted to sell off several parcels of the Oregon Hill linear park (now named Samuel Parsons Park) and was only stopped with an extensive neighborhood campaign.

The Richmond Inspire Plan inequitably singles out most of the Oregon Hill neighborhood for the “Lower Priority” Equity Investment Zone, which is the LOWEST priority Equity Investment Zone category. As a formerly redlined neighborhood, Oregon Hill must be placed in the “Highest Priority” Equity Investment Zone. Oregon Hill may be the only formerly redlined neighborhood that is now placed in the proposed Richmond Inspire “Lower Priority” Equity Investment Zone.



The 1937 Home Owners’ Loan Corporation Residential Security Map indicates that all of the Oregon Hill neighborhood (highlighted), like the Black neighborhoods in Richmond that faced horrible redlining discrimination, was redlined with the worst “Fourth Grade” security risk:

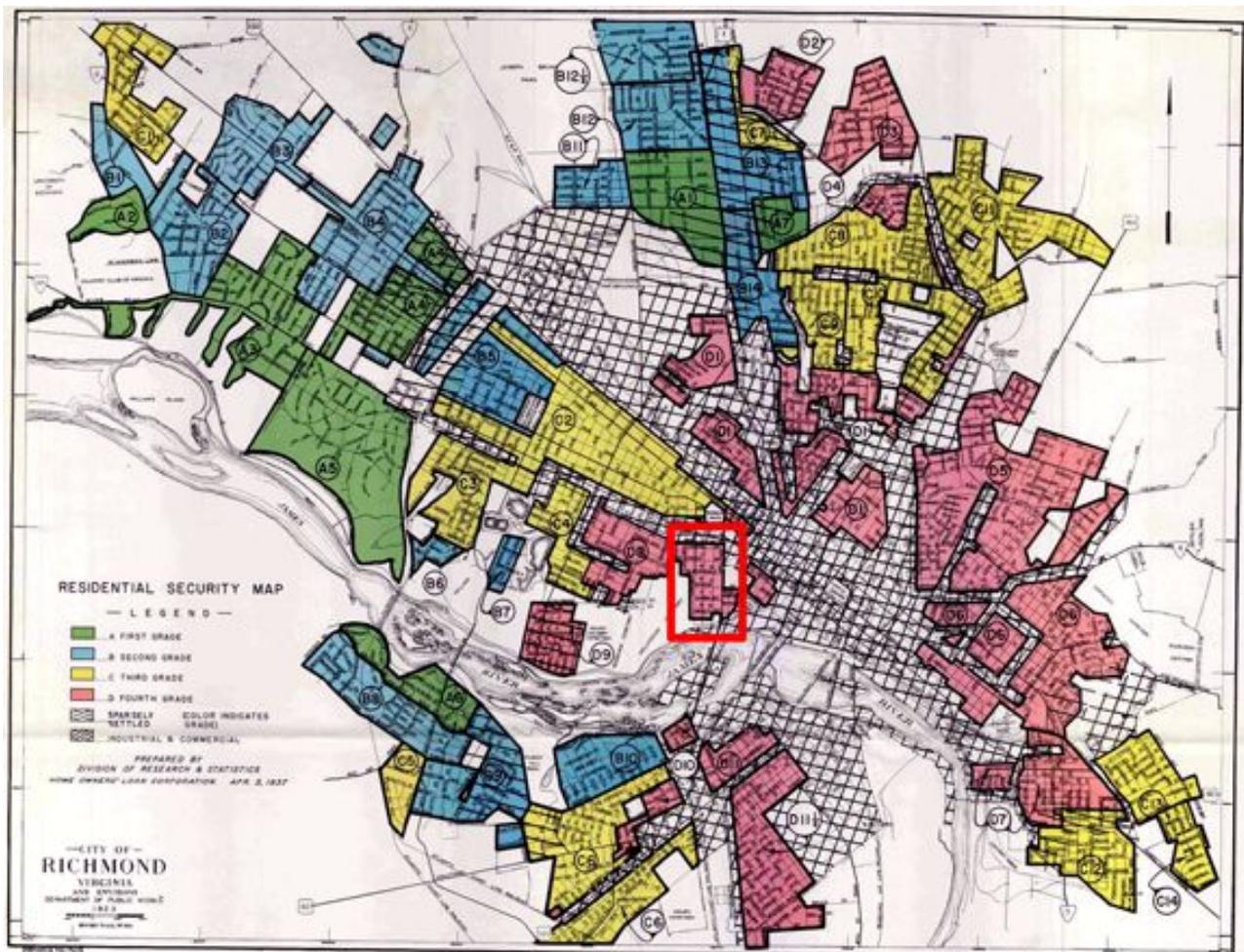


We have long suspected for decades that Oregon Hill is considered a low city priority for park funding, but it is quite painful to actually see this expressed openly in the Equity Investment Zone map. Such a low priority zone for Oregon Hill in the Equity Investment Zone map is deplorable and would continue the past neglect of Oregon Hill parks for another decade. The Oregon Hill neighborhood should be in a “Highest Priority” Equity Investment Zone.

According to Page 10 of the Richmond Inspire plan: “Low priority values in redlined neighborhoods made them easy targets for government-led “urban renewal.” This was certainly true in the redlined Oregon Hill neighborhood where the Downtown Expressway cut through the neighborhood, and where whole blocks were demolished east of Belvidere Street in the name of “urban renewal”.

As stated on Page xxi of the Executive Summary of the Richmond Inspire plan, “Richmond’s parks and recreation system still reflects a history of inequitable investment.” This is case with Oregon Hill’s parks, which have decades of deferred maintenance and deferred basic park improvement needs.

The 1937 Home Owners’ Loan Corporation redlining map of Richmond shows the entire Oregon Hill neighborhood redlined (highlighted in map below). Certainly the planners who created the Richmond Inspire Equity Investment Zone map must have been very familiar with this redline map of Richmond. How is it possible that the redlined Oregon Hill neighborhood was given the lowest priority in the Richmond Inspire Equity Investment Zone map?



While we recognize that specific projects are beyond the scope of the Richmond Inspire plan, we feel that it is important to document a few examples of the long-deferred maintenance needs found in Oregon Hill parks in the following pages.

Holly Street Playground:

We greatly appreciate the ongoing renovation of the Holly Street Playground with funding from the federal American Rescue Plan that is being led by the very resourceful Department of Parks and Recreation Capital Projects Planner Ryan Rinn.

However, beyond the scope of the Holly Street Playground renovation, there is need to remedy extensive, decades-old, deferred maintenance work to shore up the erosion on the west side of the Holly Street Playground. The Playground was built on a landfill, and ongoing erosion has created dangerous, decades-old hazards where cavities under the playground are large enough for people to camp. Oregon Hill requested that federal funds from Hurricane Gaston be used to correct this extensive deferred maintenance in 2004, but the funding was denied:



Oregon Hill Park:

The decorative stone balustrade in Oregon Hill Park at the Laurel Street Overlook was knocked over by an automobile over three decades ago, and it still has deferred maintenance. We were promised that the beautiful stone balustrade would be restored, but as we discovered a decade later, Oregon Hill is of such an inequitably low-priority that the balustrade stones were dumped in a heap behind the Byrd Park. An unsightly, unsafe, makeshift, pipe barricade has remained for decades:



Below is a photograph of the substantial stone balustrade that was originally located on the Pine and Laurel St. Overlooks in Oregon Hill Park. (Source Library of Virginia):



The Oregon Hill Gazebo:

The Oregon Hill Park Gazebo is a contributing structure to the Oregon Hill Historic District and has decades-old deferred maintenance. The Oregon Hill Gazebo needs repairs adhering to the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation for properties listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places so that it can again be a jewel of the park and opened for functional public use:



Oregon Hill Samuel Parsons Park Linear Park:

When blocks of Oregon Hill's affordable homes were demolished to widen Belvidere Street in the mid-1980s, Oregon Hill requested a buffer park with an attractive serpentine brick wall as was found on the grounds of the 18th century Belvidere mansion of William Byrd III that was formerly located nearby. We were told that this serpentine brick wall would be built. However, when it came time to build the brick buffer wall, instead an ugly prefabricated concrete wall was constructed to save money.

Several sections of the Samuel Parsons Linear Park wall have deferred maintenance from damage from many years ago:



Oregon Hill Robert Pleasants Park:

Oregon Hill residents have been working hard with their volunteer labor to make improvements to Robert Pleasants Park at Laurel and Albemarle Streets. In 2002, the city attempted to sell this city park at Laurel and Albemarle Streets to a developer, and the sale was only stopped when the neighborhood presented documentation that the land was purchased in 1971 exclusively for park use with federal "Parks in the Cities" funding.

Most of the city parks have a water fountain. However, the Oregon Hill neighborhood has been unable to get something as basic as a water fountain for Robert Pleasants Park where homeless people wait for food offered by the adjacent Oregon Hill Baptist Center. A water fountain is also needed in the Oregon Hill Linear Samuel Parsons Park where the Oregon Hill Neighborhood Association has received permission to build a community garden. The neighborhood civic association has been actively trying to raise funds for a basic water fountain for Robert Pleasants Park.

Even while the city gives the nearby private Allianz Amphitheater a \$30 million performance grant, Oregon Hill is such a low priority that we cannot even get basic water fountains in our public parks.

Typical basic city water fountain found in other Richmond parks that is much needed for Robert Pleasants Park and Samuel Parsons Linear Park in Oregon Hill:



Monroe Park:

Monroe Park is just a block away from the 1817 Jacob House, owned by OHHIC on West Cary Street, and for over a century Monroe Park has been a park resource for Oregon Hill residents. Monroe Park has seen great damage to the tree canopy of the park and to other park amenities after the park was leased to the Monroe Park Conservancy in 2014. However, according to Richmond City Council documentation from 2024, the Monroe Park Conservancy is no longer a functioning entity. Therefore, the ill-advised city lease of this oldest city park to the Conservancy must be terminated.

According to Richmond City Council Ordinance 2024-265, which removed the Conservancy representative from the Advisory Board of Recreation and Parks: “No one from Monroe Park Conservancy has been to or responded to emails in 2 years. As far as we know they have not met as a board in over 12 months... EnRichmond Foundation and the Monroe Park Conservancy are no longer functioning entities.” Furthermore, according to the Conservancy’s most recent available IRS 990-EZ form that was filed in 2023, the Monroe Park Conservancy declared \$306,961 in liabilities while raising only \$5,542 in funds, which is hardly a reasonable level of funding to fulfill its lease obligations with the City to maintain and improve the park.

The Richmond Inspire plan should include Monroe Park as a priority area so that AFTER the lease is terminated the City can begin repairing the damage to Monroe Park that was done by the Conservancy. Although the Monroe Park Master Plan called for an increase of trees in the park, the Conservancy decimated the mature tree canopy in the park by removing well-over 40 mature shade trees. In 1904 there were 362 trees in Monroe Park, and now there are less than 100 mature trees. It is imperative that this park tree canopy be restored. This would be in accord with Richmond Inspire action item 7.2d, “Within the future Tree Canopy Master Plan, include recommendations for the protection of trees and tree canopy on public property.” The squirrel population that once thrived in the Monroe Park trees also has been destroyed by the dispersal of \$2,400 per month of inhumane, anticoagulant rodent poison. This dispersal of vast amounts of poison in the park must be terminated along with the lease of Monroe Park.

Additionally, the Conservancy removed the park benches surrounding the historic fountain, and, aside from a few stray chairs, there is little place to sit to enjoy the park. Play equipment for children, such as the swing-sets formerly found in the park, should be restored in Monroe Park. None of the play equipment for children that was envisioned in the Monroe Park Master Plan was provided by the Monroe Park Conservancy.

The City must restore the bathroom facilities for public use in the Checkers House in Monroe Park. The Monroe Park Master Plan calls for the existing bathrooms to be expanded. Instead the Conservancy completely closed all of the bathrooms for public use. This is particularly negligent since the Checkers House now has a coffee shop with no restrooms provided. Monroe Park is listed as a “cultural site” in the Richmond Inspire plan; of course, public bathroom facilities are required for the large crowds that attend the cultural events held in Monroe Park.

There is much deferred maintenance in Monroe Park as a result of the failed lease of the park to the Monroe Park Conservancy. This lease must be terminated because the Conservancy is not a functioning entity, according to City Council records. The tree canopy must be restored, rodent poisons that have killed the squirrels must be removed, park benches and children play equipment must be provided, and public bathrooms must be reopened in the Checkers House:



In summary:

The Richmond Inspire park plan must change the Equity Investment Zone category for the Oregon Hill neighborhood from “Lower Priority” to the “Highest Priority” category. Oregon Hill experienced many decades of economic discrimination as a result of the redlining of the neighborhood. It is very inequitable for the formerly redlined Oregon Hill neighborhood to be placed in the lowest Equity Investment Zone category.

There is much deferred maintenance in Oregon Hill parks, which should receive the Equity Investment Zone’s “Highest Priority” for funding. Even while the City attempts to foist inequitable Code Refresh upzoning proposals onto Oregon Hill, which is already one of the most densely-built neighborhoods of Richmond, the City simultaneously proposes inequitable park funding at the lowest priority level for Oregon Hill.

According to the draft Richmond Inspire plan, “This plan will help us identify solutions for decades of deferred maintenance, curate programming to meet the needs and wants of our residents, make targeted and equitable capital investments, connect our residents to and between parks, prepare for a climate resilient future, and provide better parks and recreation experiences for Richmonders.” However, if the Oregon Hill parks remain inequitably in the “Lower Priority” [i.e. LOWEST Priority] Equity Zone category, Oregon Hill parks will continue to have deferred maintenance for more decades.

Although we recognize that specific projects are beyond the scope of the Richmond Inspire plan, it is important for the Department of Parks to be aware of the extensive deferred maintenance needs of Oregon Hill parks. Examples of this deferred maintenance include the serious erosion problem on the west side of Holly Street Playground; the dilapidated, temporary railing replacing the stone balustrade at the Laurel Street Overlook of Oregon Hill Park; the historic Oregon Hill Gazebo, which is in need of repairs following the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation; the damaged walls of the Samuel Parsons Linear Park; the lack of water fountains in Robert Pleasants Park and Samuel Parsons Linear Park; and the lack of public bathrooms, adequate tree canopy, children’s play equipment, and benches in Monroe Park.

In order for the necessary improvements to be made to Monroe Park, the City’s lease of Monroe Park to the Monroe Park Conservancy must be terminated. City Council Ordinance 2024-265, which removed the Conservancy representative from the Advisory Board of Recreation and Parks, indicates that, “EnRichmond Foundation and the Monroe Park Conservancy are no longer functioning entities.” The lease of Monroe Park must be terminated because the Monroe Park Conservancy is not meeting even the most basic terms of the lease in providing maintenance and improvements for the park. The distribution of the huge amount of inhumane, anticoagulant rodent poison, which has destroyed the squirrel population in Monroe Park, must be terminated along with the lease.

We understand that the Equity Investment Zone map will inform city park investment for the next decade. Therefore, it is imperative that all of the Oregon Hill neighborhood be in the “Highest Priority” Equity Investment Zone in order that long-deferred maintenance in the neighborhood’s parks may be ameliorated.

Thank you for your consideration of this comment on the Richmond Inspire park plan from the Oregon Hill Home Improvement Council.