



# The City's Big Bet on Tarkington Park

With a revived green space, Indy hopes to build a developer's playground in an area that has been sliding.

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## **Three days after the happy**

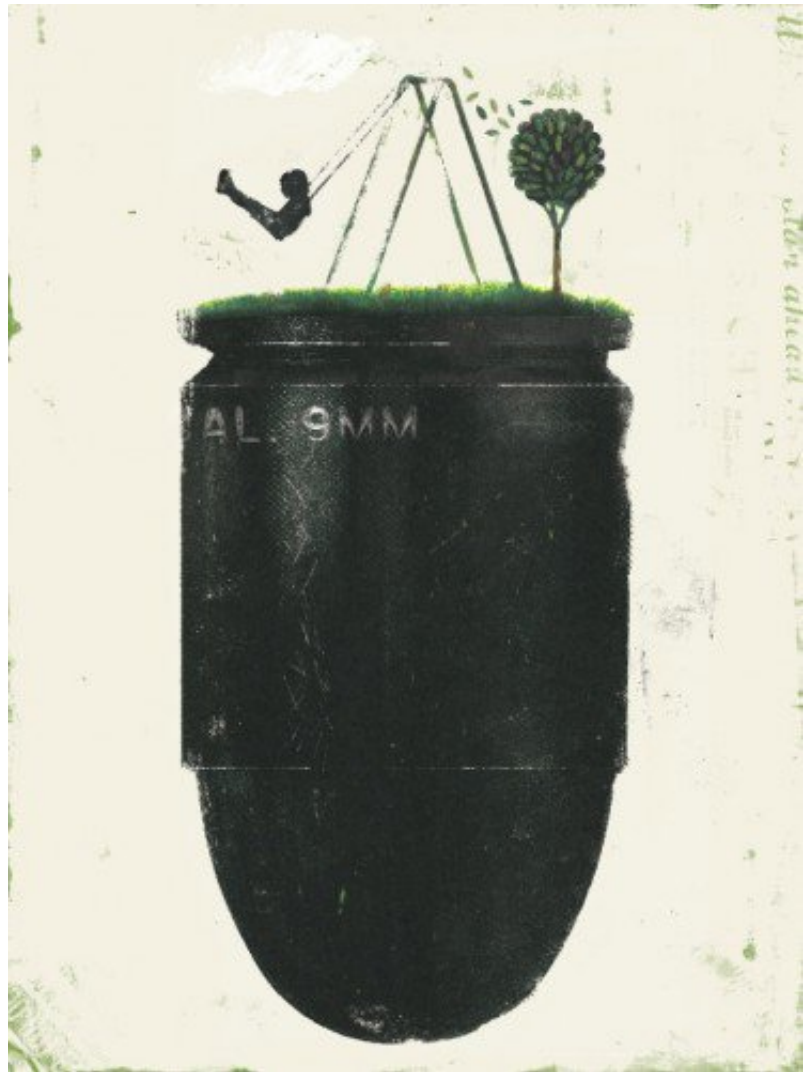
groundbreaking of the Tarkington Park redevelopment this past September, 10-year-old Deshaun Swanson sat inside a home two blocks away. Deshaun, who played football at the park once a week, had come with his mother to pay respects to an elderly woman whose wake was being held at the home. A car pulled up outside. Bullets zipped through the house. And before anyone knew what was happening, Deshaun crumpled to the floor, the 93rd homicide victim of a record-breaking year. As the shooters disappeared into the night, they took with them an unknown motive and whatever sense of security neighbors had left.

If there was any doubt that the northside Butler-Tarkington neighborhood was in the

middle of a crime wave, Deshaun's death eliminated it. Six people had been killed in two months in an area not much larger than Tarkington Park itself. Sure, the Crown Hill neighborhood south of 38th Street had struggled with lawlessness for decades. But even as some blight crept into the southern part of Butler-Tarkington, few associated that district with crime until last year. After all, charming Butler University anchors its west end. The mansions of Meridian Street form the eastern border. And all the way north to the Central Canal, \$400,000 brick homes line the avenues.

The shooting spree may have caught some residents to the north off guard, but for Midtown Indianapolis, Inc., the wake-up call came years before. As early as 2005, the community group representing several neighborhoods in the area recognized that all the money and attention was flowing downtown, starving the rest of the city. Midtown executive director Michael McKillip needed a project big enough to correct decades of neglect. He found it in a 70-year-old park that, like the commercial buildings around it, was mostly vacant. "That corner of 38th and Meridian is actually the intersection of six neighborhoods that aren't talking very much to each other," he says. "People on the south side of it think 38th Street is the north side's problem. People on the north side think it's the south side's problem. Nobody was really doing anything."

If you've driven down Meridian or Illinois streets this winter, you know the days of nobody doing anything are over. Construction vehicles have been transforming a portion of Tarkington Park into what organizers hope will be a destination green space complete with a spray plaza, cafe, and playground. When the \$5.6 million upgrade debuts this summer, Midtown and its many partner institutions don't expect to see apartment buildings, restaurants, and shops move into the area overnight. But the group isn't waiting for



development with fingers crossed, either. What was once a glorified neighborhood association is looking into buying properties. Working with one of the city's largest developers, Midtown plans to break ground on several major projects in the area in the next few years. Organizers believe the park will lead to investment, which in turn will lead to a safer neighborhood. Hopefully in time to prevent another death like Deshaun Swanson's.

**When the city purchased two square blocks** near 38th and Meridian streets in 1945 to establish a new park, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Booth Tarkington lived a short walk from the meadow that would bear his name. The surrounding Butler-Tarkington neighborhood was home to some of the city's most successful people, including the Vonneguts. Butler University recently had moved from Irvington to its present location.

In the wake of federal court decisions desegregating neighborhoods, working-class blacks moved into the area, too. As they did, unprincipled investors led a campaign to scare some white homeowners into selling at a loss. To head off any racial tension, a group of neighbors—both black and white—formed the Butler-Tarkington Neighborhood Association in 1956. Local historians have hailed what followed as one of the city's earliest and most successful integrations.

Problems didn't emerge around Tarkington Park until the 1970s, when the number of rental homes began to climb. Damon Lee, a special-education teacher at Indianapolis Public Schools who has lived in the area his entire 37 years, saw it coming. "There are just fewer homeowners than there used to be holding people accountable," he says. "Until recently, when you asked people about Butler-Tarkington, they would tell you it was one of the safest communities in Indianapolis."

One of Lee's sons plays for the Indy Steelers, the same football team that brought Deshaun Swanson to the park. And Lee's half-brother, Clarence Wade Havvard, was murdered a few blocks away in August. So the challenges of crime are not abstract to him. Nor are they to McKillip, who had just left his nearby home with his wife and 2-year-old last year when a stray bullet came through the living room. Both men decided to strive for a solution. Lee cofounded a group called Wade, named after his sibling, that brokered a truce in October between a gang in Butler-Tarkington and one at 67th Street and Michigan Road that were responsible for much of the recent violence. McKillip joined Midtown.

For almost a decade, the latter organization has had its eye on Tarkington Park as a potential anchor for the southern end of the neighborhood. Although the green space itself never became a major crime center, it had fallen into relative disuse. Perhaps the only thing

extraordinary about the large field of infrequently mowed grass was that it hosted a tennis shelter designed by renowned local architect Edward Pierre. Unaware of the building's history, Indy Parks bulldozed the structure in 2011. Preservationists cried foul. Then-Mayor Greg Ballard and the city realized they had erred. And ironically, a slight to a neighborhood already down on its luck became the catalyst for what may be its salvation.

Every park in the city has a "master plan." Indy last updated Tarkington Park's version in 1985. When the tennis shelter came down and the design buffs rose up, Indy Parks committed funds to draft a new master plan. With Midtown overseeing things, the landscape architecture and design firm Rundell Ernstberger Associates—which drafted the Cultural Trail—researched urban parks around the country. They came back with a \$12 million plan for a very different kind of recreation hub.

Of course, Indianapolis doesn't have a lot of \$12 million parks. Even the proposed \$5 million Phase 1 seemed like a long shot. As of 2013, not a single dollar had been allocated to bring in the first bulldozer. Which is why Butler-Tarkington was lucky to have former city-county councilman John Barth as a resident. Barth saw an opportunity to move \$1 million in anticipated tax revenue (called tax increment financing) from a development going up in Broad Ripple to Tarkington Park. That inspired the Indianapolis Parks Foundation to chip in \$1 million of its \$10 million Lilly Endowment Fund, which convinced the Department of Public Works to invest the other \$3 million. In the process, Great Places 2020—a new city initiative focusing investment on tightly defined areas—picked the neighborhood as one of its three pilot locations. That meant hundreds of thousands of dollars more for facade improvements to businesses around the park as well as retail feasibility studies and brownfield clean-up.

Ballard spoke at length about Tarkington Park in his 2014 State of the City address. For McKillip, that was the moment he felt the project finally had arrived. "It took 50 years for this area to decline," he says, "and we're going to make a major leap in the next five."

**If you're looking for monkey bars** and merry-go-rounds, you won't find them at the new Tarkington Park. Instead of traditional playground features, there will be a rolling landscape of rubberized mounds and climbing walls. Where there were large grassy expanses, there will be plazas made of pavers. Long, linear benches enclosing areas will take the place of classic two-seaters. Cafe and stage pavilions may turn heads with their contemporary architecture. A spray plaza will allow kids to get wet. "This is not your grandfather's park, where you go for a stroll under the shade trees," says Kevin Osburn,

principal at Rundell Ernstberger, which designed the layout. “It’s the kind of thing you’d find in a bigger city, something no one has really seen in Indianapolis.”

Skeptics who doubt the impact such a green space can have on a troubled area need only look as far as Washington Park in Cincinnati. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood surrounding it had 25 percent unemployment and 58 percent of residents living below the poverty line. A group there similar to Midtown partnered with the city, overhauled the lawn with many of the same features you’ll see at Tarkington Park, and pushed for development. Since then, \$500 million has poured into the neighborhood. Crime has dropped 50 percent in 10 years.

That’s what made Washington Park such an attractive model for the Indy project. But not everyone has been thrilled with the “new urbanism” approach. When construction fences went up at Tarkington Park in September, a surprised Indy Steelers football team found their practice area gated off. Some in the black community balked at the plans upon learning about them. In their view, programming, not pavilions, was what the neighborhood needed. One of the last pieces written by Indianapolis Recorder columnist and WTLC host Amos Brown before his death, titled “The Tarkington Park fiasco,” lambasted the work underway. “Why a square-block neighborhood needs a cafe hasn’t been adequately explained,” he wrote. “But the area’s arrogant white leaders were convinced it would single-handedly spur economic development.”

Donnell Hamilton, president of the Indy Steelers, now supports Midtown. But he wants to see a football field in Phase 2. “I just want to make sure the park accommodates the people who are already using it,” he says. “I think the splash park will be great for the younger kids. But once they get to be 14, they’re less interested in that. Then there’s nothing for them to do but get in trouble.”

As for Phase 2, it will cost an additional \$8 million. A dog park, a farmers market shelter, a stage, and a multi-use field all could be in the works. But if Midtown has to raise the money as it did for Phase 1, those things will never happen. McKillip and his partners are counting on development in the area to produce tax revenue to pay for the rest. Most of the commercial properties surrounding Tarkington Park sit vacant and for sale. Individually, none of them amount to a viable project for a developer because rents are depressed in the area, and you need to build hundreds of apartments to justify bringing in a construction team. That’s why Midtown pitched Flaherty & Collins Properties, a local company with a community development wing, on tackling the entire neighborhood. Together they started reaching out to the owners of derelict or unused properties—the empty brick building at 38th and Illinois streets that used to be a Foot Locker; the large parking lot behind the

North United Methodist Church; the former site of Double 8 Foods; the vacant spots in the Melody Inn strip mall; the oversized United Way building on Meridian Street. With low-interest loans, Midtown hopes to acquire all of them in the next few years.

Perhaps the most pressing thing to attract is a grocery store. When Double 8 closed last year, it created a food desert in southern Butler-Tarkington. Grocery stores require a lot more than the 1,500 people currently living in that half-square-mile to survive. So Midtown hopes to break ground next year on a series of mixed-use apartment buildings around the park that will be supported by tax credits. Exactly where remains to be seen. Although McKillip expects to see \$50 million invested in the area, including 400 new apartments and 45,000 square feet of retail, much of it will take until 2020 to materialize. And Phase 2 of the park, which relies on taxes from those projects? Even longer.

But Midtown fought 10 years to get this far. And when IndyGo's new bus rapid transit Red Line carves two lanes out of busy 38th Street next year—a project that itself has been the source of some speculation—McKillip hopes the traffic calming and connectivity will keep the neighborhood's political momentum going. If anything, the recent crime wave around the park has only strengthened his commitment.

“We’re not going to solve that problem by continually displacing people,” McKillip says. “Increased police presence isn’t going to fix it. We have to improve the social condition. Every group that can make things happen in this city—every philanthropic funder, major bank, city agency, and neighborhood association in the area—is now part of this project. If we can’t get it done, it can’t *be* done.”

*Tags: March 2016, Tarkington Park*

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