DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

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Graeser Park added to National Register of Historic Places

ST. PAUL, Minn. – After years of careful restoration, the Graeser Roadside Parking Area in Robbinsdale has been added to the National Register of Historic Places. This is a Minnesota Department of Transportation-owned property managed by the Historic Roadside Properties and Wayside Program.

Hwy 100 was constructed in the 1930s between Hwy 52 in Robbinsdale (now Bottineau Boulevard or Hwy 81) and Hwy 5 in Edina and included a wide center median and the first cloverleaf intersection in the state, located at Hwy 7. Completed in 1940-41, Graeser Park was nestled in that center median and was the largest and most complex of the seven Belt Line Highway (Hwy 100) roadside parks constructed by the Minnesota Department of Highways' Roadside Development Division. Located at 4400 Lakeland Ave N, the park was funded by the Works Progress Administration.

The park was identified as historic in the late 1990s but was in disrepair. After significant impacts during the reconstruction of Hwy 100 in the 2000s, it was nearly lost. MnDOT began restoration of the park in 2020. Many organizations, companies and volunteers have worked for years on the project, and this summer is the final phase of restoration. Several phases of work have included stone masonry repair at the overlook wall, the beehive oven, picnic area and the rock garden. Stone picnic tables and benches were constructed from salvaged and new materials. Repairs to the rock garden pond walls and built-in benches. Vegetation removal and planting, addition of an interpretive sign and accessible paths have made the park functional again.

"When I first saw Graeser in 2020, I was immediately struck by its potential," said Andrea Weber, MnDOT's historic roadside property and waysides program manager. "It was not razed, as my project files stated, and I knew we could do a lot to improve it."

According to evaluation documents submitted for the National Register of Historic Places consideration, when built in the 1940s, "project engineer Carl F. Graeser obtained 30,000 cubic feet of stone for Graeser Park and other Lilac Way parks from the demolition site of an unnamed Minneapolis flour mill. The picnic tables, benches and stoves came from the wrecked elevator foundation, while the rest came from the Mendota WPA quarry on the Minnesota River. At Graeser Park, the use of three materials: the Mendota Mifflin limestone in paving and bench seat supports, Kasota Stone for upright structures, and honeycomb-like 'holey stone' in the rock garden is distinctive."

Once the project is complete, MnDOT will convey Graeser Park to the city of Robbinsdale.

“The city of Robbinsdale has been a great partner with MnDOT, maintaining the park since 1940. There are also strong community supporters who have been assisting with maintaining Graser since the 1990s, when it was all but abandoned,” Weber said. “The city has always seen this wayside as a public green space, and it has been used for community events for decades. By conveying it, the park can continue to be used this way.”

Many people and organizations worked with the MnDOT Historic Roadside Properties and Waysides Program to achieve this milestone in historical preservation of the property. They include Todd Grover with MacDonald and Mack Architects, Matt Rentsch with Damon Farber Landscape Architects, Environmental Associates, Inc., Carole Zellie with Landscape Research, Northern Bedrock Historic Preservation Corps, Restoration Construction Services, Autumn Ridge Nursery, Robbinsdale Historical Society, Restore Lilac Way, City of Robbinsdale, Robbinsdale Lions, MnDOT Cultural Resource Unit, MnDOT Metro maintenance staff and many individual volunteers who spent countless hours weeding, organizing and advocating for preservation of Graeser Park.

More information on MnDOT’s wayside preservation projects can be found at https://www.dot.state.mn.us/roadsides/historic.

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