New York City’s Union Square Park to Grow Under $100 Million Plan
Charles Passy, 1.18.21

The plan would incorporate areas outside the present-day park into the footprint

An aerial view of the proposed plan to expand Union Square Park.
PHOTO: UNION SQUARE PARTNERSHIP

Union Square Park could be in line for a $100 million makeover that will greatly expand its footprint.

The Union Square Partnership, a nonprofit organization that supports and helps maintain the popular New York City-owned green space, is set to unveil a plan calling for the park to incorporate a number of adjacent and nearby areas over the coming years. The park would grow by slightly more than 2 acres to a total of 8.85 acres.

The partnership said the plan has been in development for more than two years. But in many ways, partnership officials said their vision for a larger, reconceived Union Square Park has become more relevant during the pandemic, as New Yorkers cultivate a renewed appreciation for public spaces.

Either way, the plan’s ultimate goal, said partnership executive director Jennifer Falk, is for parkgoers to know they have “arrived at a place that is special.”

The park is already a signature New York destination, home to the city’s oldest continually operating greenmarket, which runs four days a week. It has also been a setting for many protests, including ones in the past year tied to the Black Lives Matter movement against racial injustice.
And Union Square Park has been known in general as a lively urban gathering spot, populated by everyone from chess players to dog lovers with pets in tow.

The plan must still undergo an extensive review process by the city and public. There is also the question of who will pay for it. Partnership officials said they are prepared to kick in millions of dollars through fundraising and a possible bond issue but added that it will be up to the city to fund a significant share and largely handle the construction.

Partnership officials also noted that the project’s estimated $100 million cost will cover not just expansion of the park’s footprint, but also other upgrades and improvements, including construction of a new accessible subway entrance with elevator and escalator.

City officials didn’t comment on the financial aspects but voiced support for the plan in principle. “This vision will enhance Union Square Park with a more seamless, equitable and accessible design,” Mitchell J. Silver, commissioner of the city Department of Parks and Recreation, said in a statement.

The plan is very much about blending areas outside the present-day park into the Union Square footprint, including the street known as Union Square West and a portion of Broadway on the park’s northern end. Even a part of 14th Street on the opposite side of the park would essentially become part of the green space, albeit separated by traffic lanes.

These areas would be tied with the park through an integrated design concept, partnership officials said. Landscaping and paving would be especially used for this purpose, so that the existing park and the added space would have a cohesive visual identity.

A rendering shows Triangle Plaza with greater pedestrian connections and visibility among Union Square Park, 14th Street and Union Square East.
Another key element that would be more integrated into the park: a space known as Triangle Plaza that fronts 14th Street but is separated from Union Square by traffic lanes. Partnership officials said their plan might eventually call for permanently shutting down the lanes, which constitute a small portion of the street known as Union Square East.

The plan’s ideas are rooted in a growing citywide push to create park entrances and edges that merge into the urban fabric rather than allowing parks to stand apart like gated retreats. The city’s parks department dubs the approach “parks without borders” and points to projects in the Bronx’s Van Cortlandt Park, Queens’ Flushing Meadows Corona Park and Brooklyn’s Prospect Park, among others, as recent examples.

The plan for Union Square Park is broken into different projects, with their own budgets and timelines, so that work on Triangle Plaza would likely be done separately from work on Union Square West, for example. Officials with the partnership said that if the plan goes through, the work could take decades to complete. They also said they didn’t anticipate the park having to be closed at any time during the various projects.

The question remains as to whether an expanded and revitalized Union Square Park, a green space with a history going back to 1839, will still be embraced by the public as it is today. Union Square has a distinctive, even gritty character that makes it very much a people’s park, observers note.

“There are some critical qualities to the identity of Union Square that we would not want to see lost,” said Andrew Berman, executive director of Village Preservation, a neighborhood group covering Greenwich Village, East Village and NoHo.

But partnership officials said the aim is to preserve Union Square’s character. And Adrian Benepe, a former city parks commissioner and the current president of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, said he believed that could be accomplished even while expanding the park and improving its look and feel.

“Chess players and protesters like attractive parks, too,” he said.