



**A  
unique  
urban  
amenity**

**WHITE RIVER STATE PARK**

# An urban state park coming into full bloom

**T**HE TERM “STATE PARK” CONJURES UP visions of fall foliage, of welcoming woods, of deer, of grasslands and hillocks and hiking trails. A fire in the great room at the inn.

But there is one state park, just one, where the aesthetics are not nearly so bucolic, where sculpture replaces trees and where museums replace lodges, where the waterway features not canoes but paddleboats, and where a canal walk substitutes for the footpath.

It is White River State Park, an amenity which stands unique in Downtown Indianapolis, the result of an idea dating nearly back half a century but only now coming into full bloom. Geographically, White River State Park encompasses 250 acres beginning at West Street and extending westward to White River Parkway, on the eastern edge of the Indianapolis Zoo.

Bob Whitt, the park’s executive director, explained it this way: “This is like a mall, with anchor tenants and we’re the

landlord.” Those anchor tenants include the zoo, the Indiana State Museum, Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, and Victory Field, home of the Indianapolis Indians.

Whitt and his staff are responsible for the green spaces of the park, while also doing a lot of “cross-pollination” marketing and promotion.

The state park also includes Military Park, a space which dates to the very foundation of the city and which is in fact protected by the Indiana Constitution. The park also includes the Central Canal – at least the part of it which runs from West Street to the White River. (The City of Indianapolis is responsible for the Central Canal from West Street to the Indiana Government Center, and then its nine-block run straight north to 11th Street.)

Last year, three million people visited White River State Park – not counting the countless throngs who walked the Canal or attended the many unticketed events. They came for the many events hosted by the park’s major tenants, but also for the 91 events hosted by White River State Park. “From small weddings to SkyConcert, and everything in between,” said Whitt.

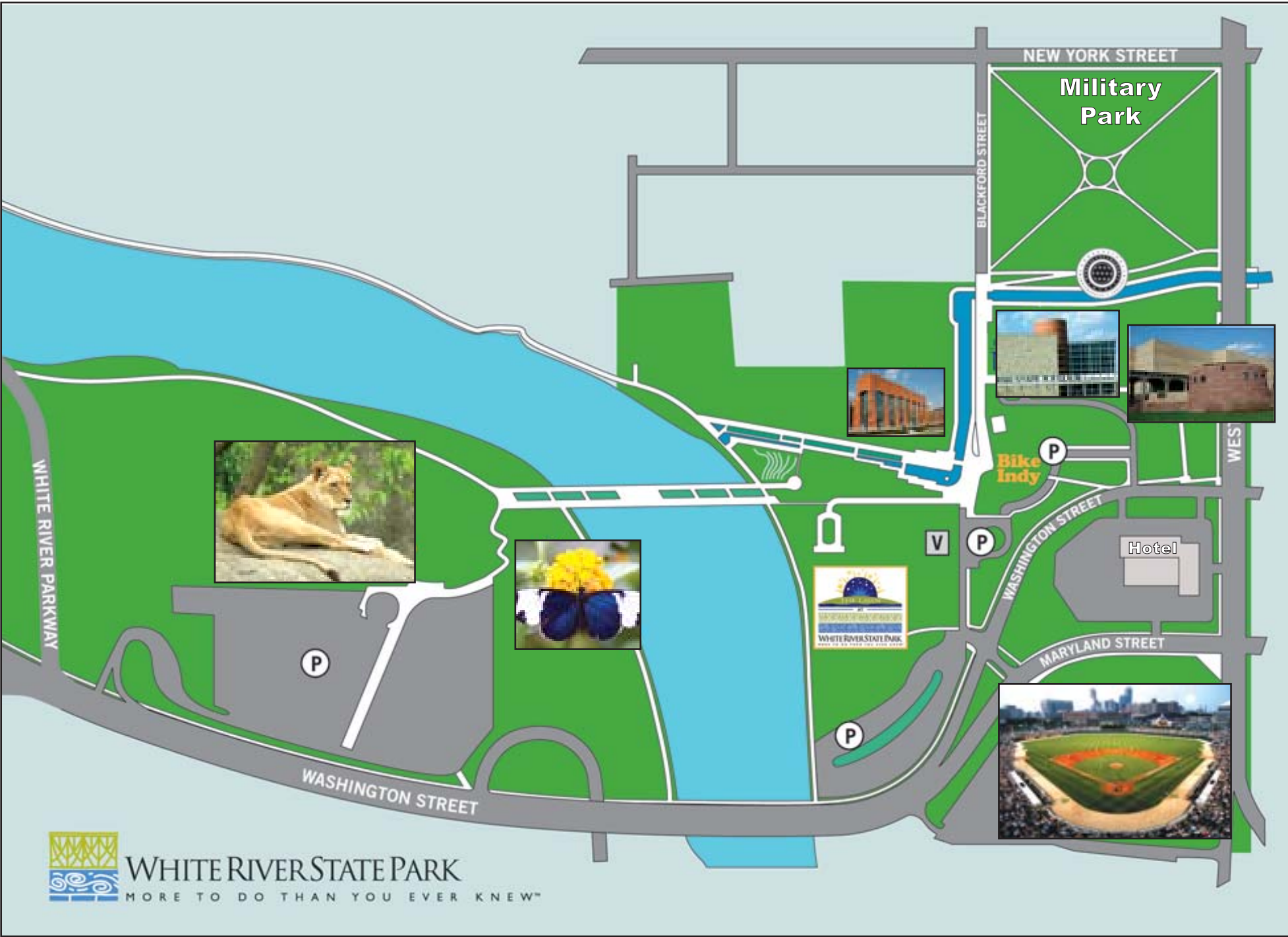
They came for the Concerts on the Lawn series, which in its four previous summers has hosted such luminaries as Bob Dylan; the Allman Brothers Band; Lyle Lovett; the Indigo Girls; Crosby, Stills and Nash; and Allison Krause. This year’s lineup, not fully complete, features such names as Death Cab for Cutie, Weird Al Yankovic, and ex-Monkee Davy Jones.

But there’s more this year, as White River State Park launches a new summer series in the Celebration Plaza Amphitheatre, a grassy, terraced incline located along the White River between the end of the Central Canal and the Old Washington Street Bridge. The free, eclectic series opens June 14 with a performance by the Indianapolis Children’s



Photo provided by White River State Park

▲ The Indiana State Museum, which opened in 2002, was built around the IMAX Theatre, which opened in 1996 along the extended Central Canal.





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**Bob Whitt**

Choir, with other installments including such performers as Dance Kaleidoscope, Asante Children's Theatre, and the Indianapolis Opera.

Anyone making it to Celebration Plaza – marked on the east by the "Totem" sculpture – will probably be drawn to the Old Washington Street Bridge by more sculptures, part of the juried Sculpture in the Park program which occupies the pedestrian bridge which spans the White River leading to the Indianapolis Zoo and White River Gardens.

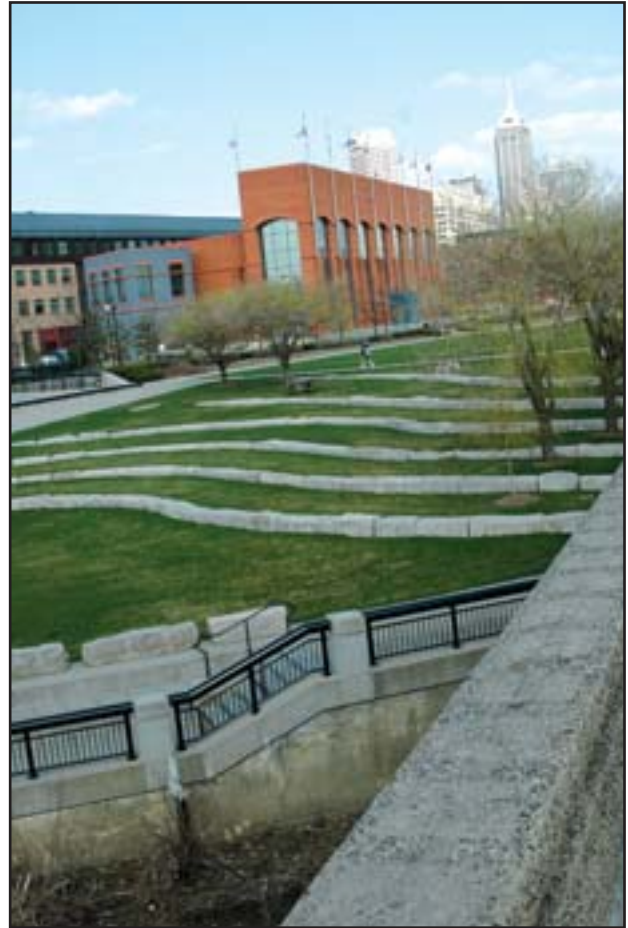
The historic bridge is a key factor in the park's development. From 1833, a bridge stood at that site, carrying travelers on the nation's first major highway, the National Road. The current bridge opened in 1916, carrying vehicles until 1994, when Washington Street (U.S. 40) was rerouted southward to clear the way for a more consolidated park space.

"That was a stroke of genius," Whitt said. "Moving Washington Street really made the park. Without that, it wouldn't have the feel it has."

The ambiance would also have been quite different had earlier visions for the state park come to fruition. Early planners foresaw a Midwest version of Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen's amusement park and garden space. Knotts Berry Farm was approached to bring a theme park feel to the urban space. In 1980, world-famous architect Cesar Pelli designed a 750-foot obelisk to be placed in the park. Derisively labeled "the Corncob," the plan was rejected as being too rural in nature; Pelli would go on to design Petronas Towers, the world's tallest building.

But planners would go in another direction. The Indianapolis Zoo opened in 1980, the Eiteljorg in 1989. Victory Field would open in 1996 to rave reviews as the best minor league ballpark in America, and the fans would come – they would surely come – every year thereafter. (Editor's aside: White River State Park, as the landlord, manages all the park's greenspace – except the best greenspace of all, the hallowed pasture between the foul lines, where poetry is written throughout every summer.)

That same year, the IMAX theater would open, six years



▲ Celebration Amphitheatre sits between the west end of the Canal and the Old Washington Street Bridge.

## Summer series coming to Celebration Amphitheatre

Performances are scheduled two Saturdays a month from June through September.

- ☐ June 14 – Indianapolis Children's Choir concert. 2:30 p.m.
- ☐ June 28 – Indianapolis Chamber Orchestra with Grammy Award-winning children's artist Bill Harley, 2:30 p.m.
- ☐ July 12 – Orquestra Bravo! 1 p.m.
- ☐ July 26 – Dance Kaleidoscope family performance at 8 p.m.
- ☐ Aug. 2 – Shakespeare on the Canal, with "The Merchant of Venice" performed by the Heartland Actors' Repertory Theatre. 2:30 p.m.
- ☐ Aug. 23 – Asante Children's Theatre. 2:30 p.m.
- ☐ Sept. 13 – Indianapolis Opera in the Park, featuring familiar opera hits, the best of Broadway and musical highlights from Indianapolis Opera's upcoming season. 2:30 p.m.
- ☐ Sept. 26 – The Quebe Sisters Band: A WestFest Celebration Concert. 5 p.m. ■

ahead of the Indiana State Museum which would eventually surround it. In 1999 came the Congressional Medal of Honor Memorial as well as White River Gardens, and in 2000 came the NCAA national headquarters and its own museum, the Hall of Champions.

The result, said no less an observer than The New York Times: “Indianapolis’s version of the Mall in Washington.”

Whitt, meanwhile, focuses on the daily issues of maintaining the state park’s infrastructure. The most recent and most high-profile task: cleaning the canal, a joint effort of the city and White River State Park. That project was more typical of the state’s only urban state park.

The park is operated by the White River State Park Commission, established in 1979. Unlike every other state park, it is not within the Department of Natural Resources;



Photo provided by White River State Park

▲ Since its opening in 2003, the Governor’s Lawn has attracted throngs to hear such groups as Bob Dylan, Lyle Lovett and The Indigo Girls.

Whitt reports directly to the governor. The idea, Whitt said, goes back to the mayoral days of Dick Lugar, who recognized two things: the potential for the Downtown area along the White River to become a park, and the city’s inability to pull off the project. In those days, the area residents now play in was home to a grain silo, a meat packing plant, warehouses and a stockyards (on the zoo side of the river).

## A timeline

□ 1822 – The city’s first documented Fourth of July celebration is presented in what is now known as Military Park.

□ 1836 – Development of the Central Canal begins.

□ 1852 – First state fair conducted in Military Park.

□ 1861 – Military Park used as a Civil War encampment.

□ 1870 – The Pumphouse opens, providing pressurized water for drinking and fire protection to the city of Indianapolis. The facility also spurs industrial development along the riverbank.

□ 1913 – A devastating flood kills 200 people, prompting the construction of concrete floodwalls and earthen levees.

□ 1916 – Washington Street Bridge

opens as part of the National Road.

□ 1950s – City officials begin re-examining White River and its potential for waterfront development.

□ 1960s – Factories along Washington Street begin moving out, pushed in part by the growth of IUPUI.

□ 1969 – Indianapolis Water Co. closes the Pumphouse.

□ 1976 – Pumphouse and surrounding property, in excessive disrepair after being abandoned, is gifted to the city.

□ 1979 – The Indiana General Assembly creates a 10-member, governor-appointed White River State Park Development Commission, which initiates such actions as the relocation of Washington Street and the gradual land acquisition of deteriorating factories and property.

□ 1988 – The Indianapolis Zoo opens.

□ 1989 – The Eiteljorg Museum of

American Indians and Western Art opens.

□ 1994 – Renovation of the Washington Street Bridge begins.

□ 1996 – Victory Field opens.

□ 1996 – The \$20 million extension of the Central Canal from West Street to White River is completed.

□ 1996 – The IMAX 3D theater opens, the first such facility in the state.

□ 1999 – The Congressional Medal of Honor Memorial is dedicated.

□ 1999 – The Sculpture in the Park exhibit opens on the Washington Street Bridge.

□ 2000 – The NCAA Hall of Champions opens.

□ 2002 – The Indiana State Museum opens.

□ 2003 – The Visitor’s Center, Governor’s Lawn and oval are opened, at the completion of the project on the former site of Beverage Paper Co. ■

The Beveridge Paper Co. factory was the last to go.

As the evolution of the Downtown space continues, Whitt keeps a wary eye on balance. Evidence is a continual debate over the Central Canal. Whitt said that people are fairly evenly split about its development: "Some want a nice quiet place to stroll," he said. "Others want it to be like San Antonio's River Walk," a vibrant, restaurant- and flora-lined route through the historic Texas city.

The San Antonio route is not Whitt's choice, although he envisions adding a few more amenities "without affecting the quite serenity of the place. We're always looking for ways to add interest and visitations," he said, "as long as we can retain our green space. It's always a balancing act."

- Bill Brooks



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## The components

White River State Park is composed of 250 acres of land on both sides of the White River in Downtown Indianapolis.

### Major components

❑ **Indiana State Museum**, dedicated to telling the state's story in high-tech, high-touch exhibits chronicling Indiana's past, present and future.

❑ **IMAX Theater**, boasting the largest screen in the state, showing 3-D and 2-D movies on a six-story screen.

❑ **Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art**, one of only two museums east of the Mississippi River with Native American art and cultural objects, as well as Western paintings and bronzes.

❑ **Indianapolis Zoo and White River Gardens**, featuring nearly 350 species of animals and almost 18,000 plant specimens, along with one of the country's few totally enclosed, environmentally controlled dolphin pavilions.

❑ **NCAA Headquarters and Hall of Champions**, featuring an array of interactive displays, three theater presentations and other exhibits to celebrate champions of all 23 sports in the NCAA's three competitive divisions.

❑ **Victory Field**, home of the Indianapolis Indians and considered one of the best, if not the best, minor league baseball field in America.

### And ...

❑ **Military Park**, once a Civil War encampment and training field, and site of the first Indiana State Fair and first documented Fourth of July celebration. It is now a constitutionally protected 14-acre site used for festivals and celebrations.

❑ **Old Washington Street Bridge**, built in 1833 on the old National Road, and renovated as a pedestrian crossing when Washington Street was diverted south to allow for the creation of White River State Park.

❑ **Governor's Lawn**, a grassy amphitheater opened in August 2003 and seating up to 5,000 people.

❑ **Congressional Medal of Honor Memorial**, the nation's first memorial dedicated to recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

❑ **Dr. Frank P. Lloyd Sr. Visitor's Center**, opened in April 2003 to serve as a respite, shopping venue and restroom for park visitors.

❑ **Sculpture in the Park**, an array of public art standing on the bridge, as the result of a biennial juried competition.

❑ **Celebration Plaza**, a grassy amphitheater sitting along White River between the Canal Walk and Old Washington Street Bridge.

❑ **Central Canal**, built in 1996 as an extension of the historic Central Canal, running from the Indiana Government

Center at West Street and emptying into the White River.

❑ **Pumphouse**, a restored water pumping station which began operation in 1871 and provided the first public water service for the city. It now features displays on the park's development, as well as history of the water company, and also serves as the offices of the White River State Park Development Commission.

❑ **River Promenade**, a walkway lined with trees and evergreens on the west bank of the White River, offering great views of the water as well as the city's skyline.

❑ **Memorial Overlook**, located on the East Bank of the White River next to the Pumphouse, and dedicated to four community leaders who died Sept. 11, 1992, en route to Columbus, Ohio, on White River State Park business. They are Michael A. Carroll, Frank E. McKinney Jr., Robert V. Welch and John R. Weliever.

❑ **National Federation of High School Associations** headquarters, housed in the restored Acme-Evans Grain Mill's superintendent's building adjacent to the NCAA Headquarters and the Central Canal.

❑ **Segway of Indiana Tours**, a two-wheel motorized way to tour White River State Park.

❑ **Wheel Fun Rentals**, with bicycle and fringe surrey rentals for park users.

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