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Fort Worth looking at reopening Heritage Plaza

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FORT WORTH — From the catwalk at Heritage Plaza, a visitor can look left and see the confluence of the West and Clear forks of the Trinity River, where Fort Worth was born as an Army outpost.

To the right, condos are being built on the bluff overlooking the river. Traffic rumbles across the Main Street viaduct.

It's one of the best vistas in Fort Worth, and it's been closed to the public for more than 18 months.

City officials say they're taking steps to reopen the park and reverse years of neglect. But it will take months and millions of dollars just when the city is short on funds.

And frustration is growing among preservationists who want to see the park revitalized.

The plaza was designed by Lawrence Halprin, a nationally known landscape architect. He has designed similar plazas from San Francisco to Philadelphia. When the park opened in 1976, it drew dignitaries including Lady Bird Johnson.

"The idea was to make that a place where all the people could realize this was where the whole shooting match started," said Ruth Carter Stevenson, who organized the fundraising for the project in the early 1970s as head of the Amon G. Carter Foundation.

"Then all of a sudden it was just sort of abandoned, with the city saying there were too many homeless people" in the park, Stevenson said Monday.

Susan Fine, a member of the American Volkssport Association, a national club, wanted to use the park for one of the club's conventions this summer. She's started a letter-writing campaign to find out more about the park's closure.

"I think all of us understand budgets," she said. "What is the cost? Is it something a grassroots effort could help with? We just basically would like some information now."

In the last two years, the plaza has been listed as an endangered site by both Historic Fort Worth and Preservation Texas. The Cultural Landscape Foundation has labeled it a "Marvel of Modernism."

It's also in pretty bad shape. The original design was a series of paths that led through a grove of trees down to the catwalk, with its spectacular view. The whole space was surrounded by walls that flowed with water. A series of concrete channels followed the paths, sometimes alongside, sometimes across the paths and sometimes at shoulder height.

But as time went on, the concrete shifted. Leaves and trash often choked the channels. The pumps and electrical equipment wore out. There was no lighting at night. And the walls and trees themselves tended to give the whole place a secluded feeling and made it at least seem like a hideout for homeless people.

No single incident led to the park's closure, Assistant City Manager Fernando Costa said. But city officials clearly worry about another accident like the one at the Water Gardens in 2003. Four people drowned in the central fountain, and the accident was blamed on high water levels.

"You might say our failure to provide proper maintenance contributed to some of the problems" at the Water Gardens, Costa said.

In 2007, the nonprofit group Streams and Valleys hired engineering firm Carter & Burgess to assess Heritage Plaza.

"The fact is that most city residents refuse to enter the park, feeling it to be an unsafe environment," the report says.

Fixing the park is problematic. There's a seating area next to a steep drop that is not protected by a guardrail. The paths and water features aren't separated by curbs in many places.

If the city does make repairs, the whole place will have to be brought into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, meaning changes such as wheelchair ramps and more-accessible crossings over the water features.

The Carter & Burgess report estimated the cost of repairs at \$7.3 million.

Those kinds of problems have led other cities to take drastic measures. Denver ripped out most of a similar park designed by Halprin rather than renovate it. Costa said there are no such plans for Fort Worth's park.

The Carter Foundation has hired an associate of Halprin to assess the park and come up with ideas to modernize and reopen it.

It's unclear how repairs would be funded. The city is expected to reap hundreds of millions from natural gas drilling underneath city property, but that money will arrive incrementally over several years. Private fundraising is another option, Costa said.