DOWNTOWN ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

JACOBSON PLAZA

PINNACLE AWARD 2026
PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS
SUMMARY

Downtown Sioux Falls, Inc.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Jacobson Plaza is a 7-acre, $19 million signature park located at the northern edge of downtown Sioux Falls within Falls Park, adjacent to the city's namesake waterfall attraction. Once a neglected industrial storage site, the reclaimed parcel now functions as a high-performing downtown civic anchor that supports both residents and visitors with year-round recreation and gathering space. Opened in summer 2025, Jacobson Plaza represents the City of Sioux Falls' largest public-private partnership in Parks & Recreation history to date. The project's purpose was to preserve and expand park land amid rapid redevelopment in the northern downtown district while creating a destination that would increase downtown connectivity, strengthen pedestrian circulation and provide inclusive amenities that serve diverse ages and abilities. Rather than a single-use park, Jacobson Plaza deliberately consolidates complementary public amenities into one walkable district to maximize cross-programming, extend visitor dwell time and create a model for four-season public life. Key elements include the city's first outdoor refrigerated ice-skating ribbon (14,000 square feet) supported by a warming house and The Lodge Grill, the city's largest splash pad, the region's largest inclusive playground (26,000 square feet), an off-leash dog park and flexible open spaces designed to adapt to evolving community needs.

INNOVATION

Jacobson Plaza is innovative because it reframes downtown park development as a four-season civic infrastructure investment rather than a seasonal amenity. The project deliberately consolidates skating, inclusive play, water recreation, dining and gathering into a single walkable district to maximize cross-programming, extend visitor dwell time and create year-round public life in downtown Sioux Falls. The city's first outdoor refrigerated ice-skating ribbon (14,000 square feet) is a standout innovation that directly addresses winter seasonality. Supported by a warming house and The Lodge Grill, fire pits and ornamental lighting, the ribbon creates a winter destination that expands evening use and strengthens the district during traditionally low-activity months. The region's largest inclusive playground (26,000 square feet) advances equitable placemaking by enabling "play for everybody" through wheelchair-accessible and sensory-rich structures serving a range of physical, sensory and cognitive needs. From an implementation perspective, the project demonstrates innovative execution on capped brownfield soils. The design team coordinated structural footings and utility depths to avoid disturbing the contamination cap and directed stormwater through treatment areas before reaching the river, pairing high-performance placemaking with long-term environmental stewardship.

OUTCOME

Jacobson Plaza delivered measurable outcomes aligned with its core goal: Converting an underutilized downtown brownfield into an inclusive, four-season destination that strengthens public life and connectivity. Since opening in summer 2025, the park has welcomed over 200,000 visitors and now records daily visitation higher than the previous busiest park in Sioux Falls. The park's inclusive, multi-generational program mix has proven to be a powerful driver of year-round activation. The region's largest inclusive playground (26,000 square feet) supports play for children and families of all abilities through wheelchair-accessible elements and sensory-rich structures. The city's largest splash pad is open to the public for free, with spray features grouped by age and designed for a range of abilities. Winter performance has been especially significant for downtown vitality. Since the ice ribbon opened in late November 2025, almost 20,000 visitors have come to Jacobson Plaza, and several Saturdays during the holiday season exceeded 1,000 skaters in a single day. These results demonstrate demand for winter programming and confirm the project's four-season model. Designed as a permanent signature park, Jacobson Plaza supports both high-energy and passive uses and includes flexible spaces intended to adapt over time, enabling durable community benefit and continued growth through evolving programming.

EXECUTION

Jacobson Plaza moved from concept to completion through disciplined project leadership, community-driven programming decisions and technical problem-solving on a constrained brownfield site. In 2021, Sioux Falls hired the project team to develop a viable ice ribbon park concept and partnered with the newly developed Community Parks Foundation to undertake stakeholders and public engagement. The community prioritized winter activities, a large playground, accessible restrooms, safe water play and a dog park. As support grew, the project's scope and budget expanded while remaining aligned to the community's goals. The Landscape Architect served as lead throughout design and construction, coordinating a diverse team including architects; geotechnical, mechanical, electrical, civil, and structural engineers; local historians; city personnel; private donors; water resource engineers; ice and food service consultants; and permitting agencies. During design development, specialized subconsultants evaluated expenses, revenue, staffing and operations to inform both design and long-term management decisions. Execution required careful protection of an existing contamination cap. Much of the site is above brownfield soils with a clay cap only a few feet deep in areas, requiring coordinated structural footings and utility depths and the use of spread footings to avoid disturbance. The team also graded stormwater to move through treatment areas before reaching the river and selected locally relevant, durable materials and plantings to limit maintenance and extend lifespan.

ENGAGEMENT/REPRESENTATION

Engagement and representation were foundational to Jacobson Plaza's program and design. In 2021, Sioux Falls partnered with the project team and the newly developed Community Parks Foundation to conduct stakeholder and public engagement exercises. Community feedback directly shaped the project scope, with priorities including more winter activities, a large playground, accessible restrooms, safe water play and a dog park. The project's built outcomes reflect inclusive and equitable intent. The 26,000-square-foot inclusive playground was designed to support "play for everybody," with wheelchair-accessible play opportunities and sensory-rich structures that serve diverse physical, sensory and cognitive needs. Seamless surfacing supports mobility devices and strollers, while seating areas and shade structures provide comfort and respite for caregivers and multi-generational visitors. Jacobson Plaza also supports a wide range of stakeholders through downtown connectivity and year-round activation. Located adjacent to the Levitt Shell, Phillips Avenue development and the Greenway Riverfront, the park enhances pedestrian connections and creates a public gathering place that benefits residents, visitors, nearby development and the evolving downtown district.

REPLICATION

Jacobson Plaza offers a replicable model for downtown districts seeking measurable, year-round activation and equitable access to public space. The core strategy is adaptable: Intentionally co-locate complementary amenities (winter activity, inclusive play, water recreation, flexible gathering space and food/service support) to multiply visitation, strengthen cross-programming and extend dwell time across seasons. The project also demonstrates a scalable partnership approach. As the City of Sioux Falls' largest public-private partnership in Parks & Recreation history, Jacobson Plaza shows how coordinated leadership across city staff, donors and specialized consultants can expand project ambition while supporting long-term operations planning. Importantly, the project is replicable for communities with constrained or environmentally challenged sites. Jacobson Plaza was built over capped brownfield soils, requiring careful coordination of structural footings and utility depths and the use of spread footings to protect the contamination cap. This execution approach provides a roadmap for transforming underutilized parcels into durable civic assets. For smaller districts, the model can be phased: Begin with one anchor feature (e.g., winter ribbon or inclusive play) and add complementary amenities and programming over time, leveraging flexible spaces designed to evolve with community needs.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

https://www.explorethefalls.org/parks-paths/jacobson-plaza

https://dtsf.com/