

## Urban Parks – the New ROI

A presentation by Will Rogers for Lambda Alpha, Chicago 5/16/07

I think that those of us who live and work and believe in cities set a high standard. It's not enough for a city to "work" – and many don't. It's not enough for a city to be "livable" and many aren't. What we really want are lovable cities – cities that when they come up in a conversation, people say – "that's a great place to live." All of us who work in cities and try to help shape the urban fabric know that creating a truly lovable city often seems like pure alchemy. And if I've learned anything about what makes vital, healthy and wonderful cities it's the presence of a broad set of attributes and investments that when put together, sing.

We need all the pieces - cultural institutions, housing, retail, economic vitality, transit, parks and the public realm, public safety, and basic infrastructure. But I'm a parks guy – an undeveloper – focused on the outdoor public realm and nature in the city. And you simply can't have a great or a lovable city without a great parks system. So let's talk about parks, gardens, plazas, and trails – or as some call it (and probably not the marketers...) "Green Infrastructure". I'd like to share with you how cities are leading with public realm investments to become more competitive, to attract the right demographics and to achieve their economic development and quality of life goals. This is a trend that may seem counterintuitive to those who see parks and green infrastructure solely as amenities with programming, maintenance and safety concerns. For that reason maybe I should have titled this talk – "Urban parks and the public realm – no longer just another pretty face!"

I won't reminisce about the Olmsted-era or the 'city beautiful' movement of the early 1900's and how civic leadership of that time understood the essential role of parks and nature in urban life. Or how we forgot those important lessons in the mid-twentieth century as Americans chased the American dream to the suburbs and newer cities came up short on the public realm and parks. I'm going to focus on the present and recent past.

It's no coincidence that cities are rediscovering parks as people are rediscovering and moving back to our cities. Urban populations are once again on the rise and the "young and the restless", the creative class, empty nesters – are bringing more than good economics back to the city – they are also bringing their quality of life expectations downtown. How have cities been responding? When it comes to parks, principally through two investment strategies: restoring our legacy parks, and creating new downtown signature parks. I'll talk for a moment about each strategy and then highlight a third that is just beginning to take hold in a number of cities and which holds great promise for the future – the focus on neighborhoods and on a parks system that serves all urban residents.

Cities have been actively restoring their legacy parks for the past quarter century: renewing run down but venerable urban parks after years of disinvestment. Central Park with its Central Park Conservancy friends group is a well-known example. In partnership with the City, the Conservancy led a \$200 million private renovation effort and provides ongoing financial and volunteer support for maintenance. But there are plenty of examples: Forest park in St. Louis, Piedmont Park in Atlanta, or the Emerald Necklace in Boston have similar stories where public attention and significant private resources went into turning around years of deferred

maintenance and neglect. Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library was long a victim of neglect and its own design – but here again, a facelift, programming, greater security, visitor serving retail – all come together to make this a cherished public space in the heart of Manhattan. All these investments have led to greater civic pride and changed perceptions from residents and visitors, alike, about the health of the city and its commitment to quality of life.

The learning here should be obvious – it makes no sense to have important civic assets and let them deteriorate: you negate all their benefits and create problems rather than opportunities.

The restoration strategy renewed existing parks. But as cities have outgrown their parks, many have turned to the second strategy of creating new signature parks in the downtown to change perceptions and attract investment. This is where most of the parks action is today. These new parks often provide more active entertainment and are often the setting for cultural institutions and other public realm benefits. Here are a few cities that can claim these investments have led to real transformation and significant returns in tourism and economic development:

- Chattanooga rediscovered its Tennessee River shoreline and has created a destination waterfront presence with parks, trails and cultural institutions that have helped lead a complete transformation of the city
- In the 1990's Providence made a similar commitment to a long neglected and paved over Providence River by daylighting the river and creating Waterplace Park. The Park has helped transform and entice investment into a downtown that used to be cut off by highways and rail lines. One writer called the new Providence just a latte away from being the next Seattle;
- In 1994 Boston performed a stunning and self-financing transformation of Post Office Square – formerly a victim of parking blight. The parking is still there, but now it's below grade. Here's a quote from a review of the park by Boston Globe architecture critic Robert Campbell:  
“Post Office Square has changed Boston forever. The business district used to be an unfathomable maze of street and building without a center. The park provides that center, and all around it as if by magic and magnetism, the whole downtown suddenly seems gathered in an orderly array. It's as if the buildings were pulling up to the park like campers around a bonfire.”
- In 1996 Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta leveraged the Olympics as many cities have and created a park and plaza designed to enhance downtown commercial and residential development, attract tourism and shoppers, and link with Atlanta's MARTA transit system;
- On the Seattle waterfront near Pike's Place Market, a former UNOCAL tank farm and brownfield has become a wonderful public sculpture garden thanks to the City and the Seattle Art Museum. It opened in January.
- The Platte River Greenway in Denver provides a green spine to the cities park system – (and – like San Antonio's River Walk, provides important flood control benefits).
- The final completed park I'll mention is one no list would be complete without -- Chicago's Millennium Park. It is certainly both a new signature park and a remarkable public/private effort that has garnered international attention. The city has transformed old rail yards and surface parking to a destination park with gardens, plazas, band shell and public art on top of underground parking. It's a wonderful place to visit – and that

wonderfulness is projected to pay off: Aside from the perception, image, and quality of life benefits, the park is expected to bring to Chicago over the next 10 years \$1.4 billion in enhanced property values, roughly \$2 billion in tourism, and hundreds of millions more in increased retail and business enhancement.

This trend of new high profile signature parks is still gathering steam: Here are a few examples of what's on the drawing boards for up and coming investments:

- Dallas is still smarting from losing Boeing to Chicago. The message was clear and Dallas learned the hard way that you need more than a healthy business environment to beat the competition. Dallas is now working hard and investing to create a “sense of place”. They are using the overlooked Trinity River corridor and combining transportation and flood control with parks, open space and livability. The sizzle and post card opportunities will come from three Santiago Calatrava-designed bridges that will span the Trinity River. Dallas is also converting parking lots to parks in its downtown, recognizing that quality of life for new downtown residents in the Arts District and redevelopments by Forest City and others will require more parks and open space.
- The Big Dig, with its big price tag has buried Boston's central artery and will dramatically change the city's downtown when the new parks are in place, reconnecting neighborhoods with each other and with the waterfront;
- And there are plenty of smaller cities using the same strategy. Up Lake Michigan in Waukegan, parks and open space are a major component of Waukegan's bold Lakefront Downtown Master Plan. The city is in the process of transforming its once industrial lakefront into over 600 acres of parks, playing fields, trails and natural areas. TPL is helping out with an implementation strategy for the city, precisely because we know this approach can work – creating a wonderful public realm for Waukegan residents and also providing a big payback in the economic revitalization for Waukegan's lakefront and downtown. In a sense Waukegan -- and any city that leads with this kind of investment -- is following the example of Charleston's inspirational long-time mayor Joe Riley. Riley fought the pressure to privatize Charleston's waterfront and says, “Don't be afraid to hold onto your best land for the public! Create a great public realm -- the private development will soon follow.”

And that brings us to a third approach where a number of cities have made the strategic leap beyond the downtown parks, and are investing at the neighborhood level. The efforts are varied and shaped heavily by a city's geography and history but have in common the commitment to a wonderful city-wide parks system that includes both downtown gems and neighborhood parks, gardens and trails – often including green, community accessible school yards.

Unfortunately the need is enormous. Here's a layered GIS map TPL created to show precisely where parks are most needed in LA's San Fernando Valley. The map looks at park access for the most economically challenged communities with the highest number of children. Red is not good – I think of these as maps of endangered children's habitat. When you graph where kids have the least access, the results are shocking! Despite its new downtown parks and other public realm investments, two thirds of children under 18 living in Los Angeles do not have a nearby park or garden or safe place to play. And some cities are worse than that (Chicago is in the top third).

Boston, which does pretty well, still has its pockets of need. TPL's Center for City Park Excellence is working with a number of cities to identify these needs and opportunities.

So what does it mean to invest in the parks system? Knowing where the gaps are helps. Measurable standards also help. Denver's system sets a distance of no more than six blocks from a park for every resident – and they are 90% of the way there. Mayor Bloomberg recently announced far-reaching goals for NYC including both sustainability and parks accessibility. New York has a good ways to go: its population has increased by 650,000 since the last census and 1.1 million children attending 1200 schools in New York City don't have playgrounds at their schools. This is the kind of neighborhood before and after New York needs more of.

Maywood, LA is trying to tackle its neighborhood deficits – and to those of us in the neighborhood parks business, locations like this former superfund site looked to us like a great opportunity. It's now a seven-acre park along the Los Angeles River – doubling the parks for this very dense and low income neighborhood. Clearly land recycling is key!

Chicago has always had a strong park system but it gets weaker as you move west from Lake Michigan. Beyond its downtown and lakefront parks, Chicago has identified its neediest communities where families don't have places to play and is working to address the deficits. (Goal???) The city is in the process of and expanding parks by buying adjacent buildings or recycling brownfields as in this park in Logan Square. Like several other cities, Chicago is also repositioning schools as centers of community with what Mayor Daley calls "Schoolyard Campus Parks".

Another example of neighborhood investment at scale is the Bloomingdale Trail – the planned conversion of the abandoned and weed choked Canadian Pacific right-of-way above Bloomingdale Avenue to an elevated "rail trail," that could become a three-mile, leafy, linear link through Bucktown, Wicker Park, and Humboldt Park, on viaducts over Daniel Burnham's Humboldt Boulevard and 37 other streets, from Ashland to Ridgeway avenues. The trail eventually could link to trails heading north to Ravenswood and south to the Loop. It's a big, exciting idea that definitely speaks to a vision for a wonderful neighborhood park system. Studies are under way and a first parcel that would provide both access and serve as a much-needed local park for Logan Square has already been acquired.

Lest the Bloomingdale Trail seem overly ambitious, let me use as my last example, the Atlanta Beltline, both because it combines a lot of the key ingredients of a successful investment in the "parks system" and also provides a good segue into how cities are managing to pull off these big investments.

Atlanta has never been a beacon of smart growth success or investment in parks and open space. But change is in the wind in the form of a \$2.5 billion investment - not in highways, bricks and mortar, another sports stadium or the usual infrastructure – but in a greenway and major expansion of the city's park system. Called the Atlanta Beltline, the project involves the conversion to a greenway of a 22 mile loop of largely abandoned rail corridor that circles the city only a stone's throw from downtown and that passes through 47 separate and very economically diverse neighborhoods.

What began as an engineering student's graduate thesis for a transit loop around Atlanta, became a robust and elaborate plan for a greenway with a whole host of new parks intended to provide neighborhood quality of life and spur residential, retail and commercial development along the rail corridor – an “Emerald Necklace” for Atlanta.

18 months ago, elected officials in Atlanta, its school district, and surrounding Fulton County approved a \$2 billion Tax Assessment District, or TAD, that will fund the Beltline vision through tax increment financing. The funds will go to land acquisition and capital improvements for the greenway corridor and over 1,000 acres of new parks all along the Beltline. (This is a 200 acre quarry site that will become a destination park with a large potential water feature that could also provide Atlanta with three weeks of emergency water supplies.) There will be funds for low and moderate-income housing and for new infrastructure for neglected neighborhoods where private investment is already beginning to accelerate. It may also fund some form of light rail transit along the Beltline if it pencils out. In that case more funding would need to come from the Federal government.

TPL's work beyond commissioning the greenway plan, involves working closely with the city of Atlanta to get out ahead of the development community to buy up the properties the city will need for the new or expanded parks. We're already sitting on \$25 million in key properties around the Beltline. If developers investing cold hard cash in any measure, then the Beltline vision is catching on. There isn't a landowner we visit with a key property who hasn't already been visited by a handful of developers! Once the TAD funds start flowing, we'll sell our assemblage to the city and put our funds back into more parkland. But in the meanwhile we are getting out ahead of the land rush to make sure that the Atlanta Beltline will become the backbone of a connected neighborhood park system, a green infra-structure upon which Atlanta can build for decades to come.

Based on TPL's urban parks work in cities around the country, I can tell you that there is no more ambitious and potentially transformative parks-making and city-building activity going on anywhere.

Let me finish by talking about money – because it's essential to making any of the investments our cities need in QOL. And there's no point talking about money without talking about what attracts it: vision and leadership. If we had to pick from our experience the two key success factors, they would be vision and leadership. The money will follow if these two are in place. The exact nature of the vision will be shaped by a city's history, geography and culture, but when I use the word “vision,” I mean an ambitious idea for what a city could become, and I often quote Chicagoan Daniel Burnham and his admonition to “Make no little plans...”

A big vision without champions won't get far. Leadership is essential to shape public support and awareness of how a parks investment can spur economic investment – and even reposition a city's “brand”. Most of the efforts I have discussed either began with mayoral leadership or developed it early in the process. Certainly the business, nonprofit and philanthropic communities all have essential leadership roles to play – and may actually drive the vision at the outset - but it is the city – led by its mayor - that will develop, own and care for these new assets. Chicago is lucky to have a mayor who understands this issue. Atlanta mayor Shirley Franklin

chose the Beltline as the primary issue in her re-election campaign. But there was also leadership from the city's philanthropists, corporate citizens, and community-based organizations.

The money does follow. But there are caveats. Timing is critical. During mayor Franklin's first term in Atlanta there was a major problem with the city's sewer and water system. So the Beltline had to wait in line for the right moment. It's also important to make the case to the public for the investment pay-off. But as you can see, there are an increasing number of compelling examples out there.

I'm sure you are familiar with the financing tools and structures: Many of the cases I've cited were done with some or a lot of tax increment financing. Parking revenues from new underground parking are often part of the funding package. Impact fees are available in many cities. Business improvement districts, like the one used to redesign, renovate, program, police and maintain Bryant Park behind the New York Public Library are increasingly popular. Voter-approved public funding initiatives are becoming more prevalent – and not just in counties where high growth is making conservation essential. TPL's conservation finance group has been working extensively with municipalities to help with the creation of billions for parks over the past eight years.

And we are beginning to see more multi-jurisdictional approaches: To finance the Confluence Greenway, which includes the urban St. Louis waterfront and the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, two states, four counties, and one city all worked together to create and fund joint regional park districts over a span of 40 miles on both sides of the Mississippi River.

How was Millennium Park financed? The city's financing package included \$175 million in bonds serviced by parking revenues and \$95 million in tax increment financing. (There was also the novel approach of dedicating bus stop ad revenue to help cover maintenance.) Private support was an important part of the mix: over \$240 million from Chicago's corporate and philanthropic communities. I mentioned the Central Park Conservancy raised \$200 million and virtually every major effort across the country has private investment. People are excited about making those investments in their cities! It's a combination of civic pride and good business. In the Bay Area a number of local corporations are hoping to raise \$1 million each for a major initial investment in urban parks in Bay Area Cities.

And Atlanta's Beltline will tap into nearly \$2 billion of tax increment financing and up to \$100M of private support. So the money is there if the vision, the leadership and the timing are, too.

In closing, let me return to the theme of why using these parks and public realm investment strategies is becoming the norm. I think it is the undeniable combination of good politics, good government and good business. It's all about health in the broadest sense of the word – physical human health, community health, environmental health, and economic health – the key ingredients for healthy human habitat.

In the end, cities are all about people – and parks and nature in the cities would not contribute economic value, if they didn't contribute human value. And taking off my green eyeshade and speaking to the heart of the matter, the public realm and the opportunity that nature in the city

gives us to connect with nature, with other people and with ourselves is priceless. It is part of what we need to be fully developed humans.

And for our children who risk growing up without those connections, parks can help turn some of our neighborhoods from troubled pockets of endangered children's habitat to communities where every child has easy access to safe places to play. Our children don't need Gameboys or X-boxes to flex their imagination and sense of wonder. Nature can provide a wealth of those experiences – and close to home. Local places where we can get in touch with nature are an antidote to what author Richard Louv calls “Nature Deficit Disorder”, and they are what author Robert Michael Pyle describes as “Places of initiation, where the boundaries between ourselves and other creatures break down; where dirt gets under our finger nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.” And if our children don't make that connection, their lives will be the lesser for it and so will our planet. Pyle also says of that connection: “Those who care, conserve. Those who don't know, don't care. What's the extinction of the condor the a child who has never known a wren?”

Ultimately, parks help make our cities not just livable, but lovable. Our cities will, of necessity, become denser over time. Parks and close to home nature help that density work. That was the lesson of the Olmsted era and the city beautiful movement. Former Seattle Mayor James T. Ronald got it right back in 1892, “Parks are the breathing lungs and beating hearts of all great cities and from them come whispers of peace and joy.” As a nation, we forgot that truth for more than a half-century. In city after city and community after community across America, we are rediscovering the value of the public realm. The new news is that cities are using parks systems as problem solvers to help drive competitive advantage and the urban economic bottom line. But they parks still do what they have always done – provide the beautiful and healthy places that can help make and keep their cities lovable.